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CLAYTON / HENRY

THURSDAY • April 5, 2001

Inside the Southside: Restaurant boom is on in Henry

Peter Scott - Staff

Thursday, April 5, 2001

Not too long ago, residents in Henry County were clamoring for more restaurant choices.

With the opening of eateries like the Buckhead Brewery and Grille, La Hacienda, Pilgreen's, A&A Steaks, Gregory's and Daily Grind, the choices are increasing with more on the way.

"The fire has been ignited. It's nothing but Katie bar the door from here on out," said Nan Lee, president of the Henry County Chamber of Commerce. "We'll definitely get some of that northbound dining traffic before they get to Clayton and other areas. We've got enough residents now (119,341, according to the 2000 census), and they continue to come."

Henry residents in the past were forced to drive to the so-called "restaurant row" on Mount Zion Road in Morrow to find choices other than traditional Southern cooking.

Lee has reason to be optimistic.

Henry County is beginning to grow restaurants much like it has grown residents to earn a ranking as the fifth-fastest-growing county in the nation.

No sooner than restaurants are built, they are attracting new and loyal diners.

One of the more popular and unique eateries is the 2-year-old Buckhead Brewery and Grille in Stockbridge. It caters to families, singles, businesspeople, travelers and adventurous diners.

Jason Cash, 27, has a Wednesday luncheon date almost every week with

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his 77-year-old grandmother, Virginia Davis. They eat at the Buckhead Brewery and Grille in Stockbridge.

Cousins Elizabeth Gower and Ruth Jernigan, with 6-month-old Noelle Gower and 2-year-old Sarah Jernigan, get together every other week at the same restaurant.

Some of the most sought menu items are a collection of wild-game dishes that includes bison or elk tenderloin, New Zealand venison and blackened or grilled Georgia quail.

Diners like Cash and his grandmother prefer the barbecued buffalo-nickel burger (lean ground buffalo) and ribs, but Gower and Jernigan say they ordered more traditional dishes.

The \$2.2-million, two-story restaurant is in the style of an Aspen, Colo., ski lodge, but to some it looks more like a well-built log cabin. White pine, Douglas fir and light cedar imported from Wisconsin give it that "it's not from around here" look.

The 10,000-square-foot restaurant seats 250 and brews its own beer on the premises. It even has a room with four billards tables for diners waiting.

Owner Bruce Nicely likes what he has created in Henry County so much he has moved his corporate offices from Tallahassee to Stockbridge. He is building two similar restaurants on the north side of Atlanta in Cumming and Alpharetta.

"Our strategy has been to focus on perimeter markets where populations are growing, rather than a market that's mature," said Nicely. "We're not taking a piece of someone's pie. It's just getting bigger. There is so much opportunity on this side of town. The congestion is not nearly as bad as it is in some sections of the north side of Atlanta."

Pilgreen's at Lake Dow is fancy, but family-oriented. Flanked by a major golf course and upscale housing, Pilgreen's specializes in steaks, pure and simple. Its diners are coming from as close as Morrow or as far away as Macon to dine on steaks ranging from \$9.95 to \$16.95, said Ralph Del Ciotto, food and beverage manager.

Lennie Nichols, owner of Pilgreen's, lives in Morrow and has restaurants in Morrow and Atlanta.

Sidney's, another restaurant known for its steaks, is under construction next door to the Buckhead Brewery.

A major restaurant is being courted for the Henry Towne Centre.

"We are close on several others, but we cannot release anything now," says Jeff Lucas of the Henry County Development Authority. "I think we are going to see a lot of activity around both the new Wal-Mart and Lowe's sites."

Chamber leader Lee takes it further.

"I think the population of the area is shifting south. People are coming to Henry County because we are still maintaining that sense of place and