

The Melting Pot at RiverWalk Crossing continues to make a stir after 10 years

By LAURIE WINSLOW World Business Writer | Posted: Friday, February 13, 2015 12:00 am

Romance is in the air now that Valentine's Day is near.

And for The Melting Pot that is good news as the annual holiday prompts many to reserve dining spots for the month.

Having just marked its 10-year anniversary in January, the restaurant's Jenks location continues to serve diners of all ages and appetites, and at all times of the year.

That is no small feat considering that most restaurants close during their first year of operation, according to a Perry Group study, cited by the Oklahoma Restaurant Association. Seventy percent of those that make it past the first year close their doors in the next three to five years.

On Jan. 26, 2005, Becky and Mark Chapman opened the first Melting Pot franchise in Oklahoma at RiverWalk Crossing in Jenks. By 2007, they had opened another site in Oklahoma City's Bricktown.

Over the past 10 years, both their fondue restaurants have survived the Great Recession while the one in Jenks also lived through the financial hardships of RiverWalk Crossing.

"When the economy crashed in 2009, we were immune to it at first, mainly because people still wanted to celebrate for birthdays and anniversaries," said Becky Chapman.

That was the year the couple also considered becoming owners of a Kansas City location, but many banks had stopped lending.

The economic slump of 2010 and 2011 changed everything. When money is tight, luxuries are the first to go and that affected the restaurant during the downturn, Chapman said. Guests who came to celebrate special occasions spent less money by ordering fewer courses.

The Chapmans found themselves renegotiating vendor contracts, taking on more managerial shifts and doing whatever they needed to run the business.

"You can't be afraid to fail. If you go into something so afraid that it will fall apart then you live in fear all the time in your mind. You have to be OK if it fails — you'll move on," Chapman said. "So that was our attitude, let's figure out and keep going."



The Melting Pot

Server Scott Cook making cheese fondue at the Melting Pot at The Riverwalk in Jenks, OK, Feb. 3, 2015. STEPHEN PINGRY/Tulsa World

By 2012, RiverWalk Crossing, where The Melting Pot and other small businesses are located, had entered foreclosure, just one year after a lawsuit was filed against the shopping center's owner, RWC Management Inc., for failure to repay \$28.3 million in three loans linked to the property.

RiverWalk Crossing operated under receivership until it was bought at a foreclosure auction in May 2012 by the Muscogee (Creek) Nation.

The tribe has been focusing on revitalizing the site and last month announced a \$22 million entertainment complex to be built at the RiverWalk Crossing.

Chapman said they still have customers who think the restaurant closed when RiverWalk entered foreclosure.

“These hardships have made us smarter. We know how to run the business much leaner than we used to. Controlling our labor costs, inventory, maintenance and eliminating extra expenses have kept us positive through the slower years,” Chapman said.

Today, the Chapmans' two restaurant locations employ 110 people, including 45 in Jenks.

Entrepreneurial designs

The Chapmans didn't have a business or restaurant background when they decided to become owners of the first Melting Pot franchise in Oklahoma. They both had information technology backgrounds.

Their entrepreneurial journey was born out of a desire to raise their children in Tulsa.

They were concerned, Chapman said, that Mark's corporate job would transfer them out of state. At the time, Chapman, who has a math degree, was a stay-at-home mom of three children.

They began exploring the possibility of opening a quilting store, a transmission shop before settling upon opening a Melting Pot franchise in Jenks.

It took about a year to open the restaurant as they focused on securing a Small Business Administration loan, negotiated a lease at RiverWalk and began construction.

“There are so many things you have to know about that you don't even know you have to know about. So, you have to be willing to go seek the advice from the right people and not figure it out by yourself,” she said.

Today, Becky Chapman oversees much of the restaurants' operation while her husband works for IBM.

“My advice for anyone wanting to open a restaurant: You have to be willing to work very hard. I can run the dish pit, make cheese fondue, fix the toilets, run the host stand, and bartend — well, sort of,” Chapman said. “I am on call 24 hours a day. If you like peaceful weekends, this is not for you. You have to be willing to make hard choices.”

They've always insisted on creating a family-oriented culture at the restaurant. Staff are not allowed to curse, tell naughty jokes or talk about their dates.

Joys of the job come with knowing many employees who have become like family and watching people enjoy celebrations at the restaurant — family gatherings, countless engagements, anniversaries, birthdays and date nights.

“I love seeing friends post on social media pictures of their celebrations. Even when they don’t mention us, I can spot the Melting Pot upholstery,” said Chapman. “It makes me happy to know that we have brought such joy.”