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## Melting Pot celebrates 35 years of Tallahassee fondue



Even after 35 years, fondue lovers can't get enough of the Melting Pot of Tallahassee, which serves nibble-size flavors of exotic cheeses, fine meats and sweet chocolate prepared tableside.

Who can blame them?

A bit of magic simmers in the Classic Alpine Cheese, a fusion of white wine, garlic and aged Gruyere, Raclette and fontina cheeses for a rich and earthy fondue. The cheddar cheese fondue packs strong flavor. Adventurous dippers feast on award-winning fondue loaded with sliced Italian meats like capicola, mortadella and salami.

Goodness gracious.

Entrees offer meat or vegetarian choices that can be fried alone or battered and dipped in various sweet to savory sauces.

A potential finish — chocolate fondue — is an experience in itself, whether diners go for the original dessert swirled with crunchy peanut butter, an ode to campfire snacks with chocolate s'mores or the flaming turtle, a divine flambéed mix of milk chocolate, caramel and candied pecans.

Tallahassee's Melting Pot, one of the city's oldest restaurants, is a place many residents celebrate milestone moments: graduations, proms, birthdays and, arguably the most common occurrence, wedding engagements.

"They created memories a long time ago and they still do," said co-owner Ryan Johnston, 24, as he and his brother and co-owner, Rob Johnston, 26, swapped events they've witnessed.

Rob Johnston said, "It's a great thing because they take a bit of ownership in it, and we love that."

The younger brother handles marketing, from setting up events to social media, and spends more time in the office. They both manage the floor but the eldest mostly takes that on, along with staffing.

The brothers took over the Tallahassee business a year and nine months ago, continuing the family tradition of an earlier generation of brothers — their dad included.

The first Melting Pot location opened in Maitland in 1975. Brothers Mark, Mike and Bob Johnston — two of whom worked as servers in Maitland — bought the franchising rights to expand what they believed could be unique dining in Tallahassee.

It's ballooned into a thriving franchise with 135 restaurants in the U.S. Canada, Mexico and even Saudi Arabia, with 25 locations in development worldwide.

In Tallahassee, it first opened at the basement of Barnacle Bill's.

"We are very proud of the success and longevity that our Tallahassee restaurant has achieved over the years," said Mark Johnston, president and chief concept officer of Front Burner Brands, management company for The Melting Pot.

It's hard for some to believe the Melting Pot is celebrating a 35 year anniversary.

Rima Kelley used to go with her best friend to the earlier version of the Melting Pot, which now offers 10 times what it first had on the menu.

The Melting Pot is forever etched her in memory because her husband proposed there. They'll celebrate their 25th anniversary at the Melting Pot, the place they had their first date.

But Kelley, a Deerlake Middle School teacher, and seven other women have a monthly date at the Melting Pot for a girls' night out.

They called themselves the "Dottie Party," in honor of Kelley's friend who years ago yearned to hang out with them for a temporary escape from a hectic home life.

"The Melting Pot is a place that's special," Kelley said. "A lot of times you only go on a special occasion. What I think Rob and Ryan are trying to do is make every time you come special."

Rob and Ryan know each of them by name, and many of their other fondue cult following of roughly 50 different groups. For the Dottie Party, the restaurant has on file a detailed list of what each member likes, from who wants Splenda-flavored water and who wants extra veggies.

"It's the most insane and adorable thing I've ever seen. They are so accommodating that you feel like a princess when you go in there," said Cathy Schroepfer, a Dottie Party member who also teaches at Deerlake.

The two say Rob and Ryan Johnston have made extreme leaps to expand the restaurant's menu. They also create regular specials to draw a diverse crowd and broaden the reputation they've fostered for years for special occasions, such as College and Ladies' nights.

"It's grown quite a bit," Rob Johnston said.

From an early age, the brothers can recall their father's hardcore work ethic. Even though they didn't realize it then, they were getting a front-row seat to learning the business so they could one day mold it as their own.

"He's really proud of us, I can tell," Rob Johnston said. "It makes me and Ryan really happy...I can't believe how good it's been for our relationship."

### **The Melting Pot**

2727 N. Monroe St.

386-7440

[www.meltingpot.com/tallahassee](http://www.meltingpot.com/tallahassee)

Hours: 5-10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday; 5-11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Kids eat free on Sundays.

### **Anniversary menu:**

Through Sept. 21, The Melting Pot is offering an anniversary special that's reminiscent of the original menu: Swiss cheese fondue, beef and/or chicken and the original chocolate fondue and salad.

The four-course menu costs \$35. The restaurant will donate \$5 from each dinner ordered from the special menu and half of all sales of its Love Martini to the Children's Home Society of Florida.