

Former busboy takes over Crown Point restaurant



By **Maria C. Montoya**, *The Times-Picayune*

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Eliot Kamenitz / *The Times-Picayune*

Donald Besse, like Bryan Zar, started at Restaurant des Familles while still a teenager. He was a dishwasher and now serves as chef.

RESTAURANT DES FAMILLES 7163 Baratavia Blvd., Crown Point 504.689.7834,

www.desfamilles.com **Hours:** Tuesday through Saturday, from 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.; and Sunday, from 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Zar was a sophomore at Archbishop Shaw High School in 1995 when his family moved from Marrero to Crown Point. One night, they saw the packed parking lot at Restaurant des Familles and decided to give it a try. Zar liked the place so much that he asked the owner, Patricia Morrow, to hire him as a busboy. Fourteen years later, after working at restaurants around the country, he and his wife Brooke now own Restaurant des Familles.

Zar doesn't remember what he ate at that first meal. It would be years before he overcame adolescent pickiness and took an interest in food. But he remembers the atmosphere. A bank of windows looked out on the still waters of Bayou des Familles only a few yards away. Periodically, alligators raised their heads to stare at the diners inside.

"It's like dinner and a show," Zar said.



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Bryan and Brooke Zar, owners of Restaurant des Familles.

He remembers the regulars who returned weekly for the kind of food people around here like to eat: gumbo, etouffee, catfish meuniere. And most of all, he remembers the owner Pat Morrow, or Ms. Pat, a former schoolteacher who opened the restaurant in 1993 and watched over the dining room like a mother hosting a meal for her family.

"I've never been in a restaurant that is like this," Zar said. "Even when I came here from a young age, I can always remember feeling very warm."

He and his family became friends with Ms. Pat, but at first, being a busboy was just a job for Zar, who planned to study law at Louisiana State University. Even after he enrolled in college, though, Zar drove home once a week to work at Restaurant des Familles, where he was by then a waiter.

"I would come here on weekends," he said, "and just have a blast being around the people."

The regulars celebrated the milestones of their lives -- birthdays, weddings, christenings -- at Restaurant des Familles and Zar shared these moments with them.

"At one point," Zar said, "I just said, hey, this is what I want to do."

Ms. Pat became his mentor. She schooled him on how to treat customers and walked him through the books so that he understood a restaurant's finances.

"I would be there," he said, "just gobbling up all the information."

After college, Zar went to work for the Houston's restaurant chain. They shipped him to nine cities in five years. He sharpened his skills as a manager, but he also tried to instill in his staff that generosity that Ms. Pat showed at Restaurant des Familles.



Eliot Kamenitz / The Times-Picayune
Shrimp Diane at Restaurant des Familles.

People often claim that a meal changed their lives. In Bryan Zar's case, it's the honest truth.

Even though Zar left Crown Point, Restaurant des Familles still played a important role in his life. When he wanted to introduce his girlfriend, Brooke, to his extended family, they all met there. When they later married, the rehearsal dinner was at Restaurant des Familles.

Then last year, Ms. Pat called Zar to say that she was retiring. Would he like to buy the restaurant?

"If she hadn't called," Zar said, "I would probably still be running one of the Houston's restaurants somewhere."

Brooke, who grew up in Napa, Calif., supported the move.

"I've always been up for adventure," she said.

On July 1, Zar was back working at Restaurant des Familles, but now it was his restaurant. Ms. Pat came by the first day to wish him luck and show him where the light switches are.

Little at the restaurant had changed in those 14 years since Zar first ate there. The menu, created by Ms. Pat's partner Vernon Curry, had evolved over time but still included familiar favorites, such as shrimp Diane, pasta Lafitte and softshell crab Foster. Many diners that Zar served as a student are still coming in once a week. And running the kitchen is the familiar face of Donald Basse, who had started at Restaurant des Familles as a teenage dishwasher the same year Zar began as a busboy.

Zar and his wife don't plan any big changes. They might add a few items, like more seasonal vegetables, but they won't take anything away. And they want customers to feel as welcome as they did when Ms. Pat was in charge.

"We've made a point," Zar said, "to open the door for every guest that comes in. We've had people who have never met us come up and give us hugs."