

FOCUS | CATERING FOR U

Owner of two Downtown restaurants starts catering business to have foot in the door when the economy starts its recovery



Chris Desmond/Special to The Commercial Appeal

Jay Uiberall, owner of Catering for U, displays some of the barbecue his business prepared for a private party at Alfred's on Beale Street.

CATERING FOR U

By JONATHAN DEVIN / Special to The Commercial Appeal

THE 36-YEAR-OLD co-owner of Downtown restaurants Automatic Slim's Tonga Club and Dyer's on Beale Street hopes that his most recent venture into the world of catering will set up his business for success when the economy recovers.

"A lot of people are trying to limit their losses, but we went after it a different way," said Jay Uiberall, who also owns UBEE's restaurant near the University of Memphis and manages Alfred's on Beale. "We thought (the downturn) was a good opportunity to go after business."

Uiberall and his business partner Sandy Robertson bought Automatic Slim's in October 2008 and opened UBEE's in late 2007. Their catering company, Catering for U, which draws from the menus and staffs of all three restaurants, opened June 30.

"I was looking to develop the restaurants and as we got into it, people asked for things like breakfasts, dinners, whatever, and I said, well, I might as well start a full-service catering company."

Uiberall and Robertson invested about \$50,000 in Catering for U, mostly for advertising and their Web site. The business has two dedicated event planners, but Uiberall pulls staff from his restaurants to serve events.

"We're fortunate in that we could draw from the restaurants rather than opening a new facility

CATERING FOR U

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with a new kitchen," said Uiberall. "Most places start a catering company and it's their first venture. All my restaurants have hosted large events up to a thousand people, so we're used to doing it."

Uiberall said he has no specific sales goals for 2009, but simply hopes to pick up as many events as he can before the end of the year. He said that most large catered events are scheduled a year or more in advance. In time he wants to have four or five events each week.

"We haven't done set menus because we don't want people to feel limited," said Uiberall. "So much of catering is about creating a menu to suit whatever need or vision the customer has. We can do anything from barbecue burgers to a formal wedding."

In April, Deborah Hester Harrison hired Uiberall to cater her not-so-formal wedding reception at Alfred's, where she is a regular. She

said Uiberall struck her as someone who "thinks outside the box."

"We had a 1960s-themed wedding and we were hippies," said Hester Harrison. "So instead of a traditional wedding cake, Jay designed a brownie wedding cake. They made brownies and put them in the shape of a wedding cake."

The menu, designed for 165 people, also included catfish, chicken, and other "traditional, Southern" items.

In July, Uiberall contributed to a luncheon fundraiser for Girls Inc. where Hester Harrison works.

"He was very generous and a pleasure to work with," said Hester Harrison.

Uiberall, a self-professed sushi fan, is also proud of his ahi tuna wonton crisp and dessertinis — individually created desserts served in a martini glass.

A Memphis native, Uiberall got into the restaurant business after graduating from the University of Arizona at Tucson. He started working as a server at Alfred's and worked his way up to manager before starting his own business.

Now he employs about 200 people.

"I enjoy cooking, but I like the whole thing — interacting with people, seeing them have a good time," said Uiberall. "The most rewarding thing is right before the event starts and you can look around and everything looks nice and ready to go."