

Mert's

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restaurant. Buoyed by Kelley's eye-catching, funky decor and an inspired menu, it didn't take Bazzelle long to find a regular audience.

The menu emphasizes soul food favorites (cornbread, mashed potatoes) with a healthy twist: olive oil instead of lard, turkey sausage, no meat in the vegetables.

In fact, the venture has worked so well that a second restaurant is already under consideration. It will be similar but won't be uptown, Bazzelle says. "We want to take it into another part of town. We're working on it, talking about it right now."

Bazzelle — who lured wife Renee, 42, into the business once Mert's opened — still cooks regularly. He came to Charlotte and cooked at a Holiday Inn for several years before starting a catering business out of his home. Mert's generates revenue of \$400,000 to \$500,000 annually and expects to be profitable this year.

Says Renee: "Even our worst days here are a lot better than the best days at the old place. That keeps it all in perspective."

Mert's, named for an elderly regular customer who died shortly before the Bazzelles' first restaurant closed, has been a hit for business lunches and weekend late nights. Now the focus is on improving breakfast and dinner.

"We haven't even scratched the surface," James Bazzelle says. "I think we can do \$2 million if we get that going."

The restaurant also will get a spike in sales when the 47-story Hearst Tower across the street opens next year. The Bazzelles light up when the new office tower is mentioned, envisioning a built-in audience for their 85-seat restaurant.

In the meantime, Bazzelle is happy to focus on the day-to-day rigors of running a restaurant.

"It's what I've always dreamed of," he says. "I put it off and put it off for years, but it's finally happened. It makes all the work worth it, it sure does."