

Squared Away

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Bill Shumate, founder of Square 1 Burgers & Bar, harkened back to his original business in mid-1960s Oklahoma for inspiration of the current concept. The chain has expanded to three locations over the past three years, with others to come. Photo by Mark Wemple.

Bill Shumate reached back to his Southwestern roots in opening his fledgling Square 1 Burgers & Bar restaurant chain based in Tampa, even though the current concept only vaguely resembles his original idea.

In the mid-1960s, Shumate operated a burger place across from the University of Oklahoma campus named, appropriately enough, Across the Street. It was geared to be a fun hangout for college students and other younger patrons.

Fun for a broader audience is also at the center of Square 1, which Shumate says he started from scratch. The only nods to the old era are a few steer heads on the wall, cowhide covers on some booths, and the overwhelming presence of Boomer Sooner in the crimson walls throughout each location and in the names of items on the menu.

“We spent a lot of time getting the concept down,” says Shumate, who runs Square 1 with a few other partners. “We call it western refined.”

Shumate, who has been involved with Bella’s Italian Café on South Howard Avenue in Tampa for the past 25 years, opened his first Square 1 location on North Henderson Boulevard three years ago, seemingly just in time for an economic downturn and amid growing competition among gourmet burger makers.

Late last year, Square 1 opened two additional locations in Sarasota, on University Parkway near Interstate 75 and on South Tamiami Trail. Shumate says he tries to scout locations in affluent neighborhoods and is eyeing Fort Myers in the near future. Each location contains about 4,500 square feet, plus outdoor patios, with roughly 50 employees.

“We’d like to add more locations here, if we can find one,” Shumate says. He would eventually like to build the chain to six or seven, including Orlando, Naples and the east coast of Florida.

The biggest thing that sets Square 1 apart from other burger places is its menu. Montana beef is the main item available, though customers can order other types of meat for burgers, such as buffalo and kangaroo. Ostrich has been another favorite when available.

“I like to call this a hamburger restaurant, not a hamburger joint,” Shumate says, noting the tablecloths, silverware and other accompaniments not typical of most burger places. He says he wants the restaurants to have an upscale, steakhouse-type appearance, but without overcharging for unusual items.

Another big difference with Square 1 is that its locations offer a fully stocked bar and plenty of HDTV monitors throughout each dining area. A separate party room is also available at each location.

Although fun is the key word to Square 1, operations have been anything but lately. Shumate says the restaurants still draw big crowds, with most tickets coming in less than \$20 per patron, but it’s a challenge to keep costs under control, especially given recent surcharges on deliveries to balance higher fuel prices.

“It’s better than it was last year, but not as good as we’d like it to be,” says Shumate, who has set a goal of \$2.5 million annual sales per location. “It certainly makes you work a lot harder. We had it easy starting out.”

Shumate says past experience with Bella’s can help him and his partners determine which months will be better than others and allows them to adjust accordingly. He isn’t concerned about similar competition, such as Burger 21, a concept by Tampa-based Front Burner brands that opened in Westchase last fall and will soon expand to Carrollwood.

“They’re going to do what they’re going to do,” he says.

Surprisingly, Square 1’s Tamiami location is doing well in a spot that has had numerous hits and misses over the years. Shumate says he really can’t take any credit for the success.

“You can have three or four failures in a location, then you can come along with just the right thing,” he says. “You have to be there at least a year to figure it out.”

Now 80, Shumate says he is turning more of the operations over to his partners, including Bella’s co-owner, Joanie Corneil. Yet he says he can’t help but be energized by the managers and wait staff at Square 1 locations, many of whom are in their 20s and early 30s.

“They’re such nice people, and we really enjoy working with them,” he says. “We all work hard, but we have a good time. It’s always a challenge and it never gets boring. You can do well in this business if you’re careful.”