

The Ranch brings Southern flavors, hospitality to Starkville

Sharlee Shumpert, Contributing Writer

A new restaurant from the team behind 44 Prime has opened its doors in Starkville. Led by executive chef Jeff Thornsberry, The Ranch, located on Poor House Road, brings Southern cuisine and hospitality to its menu and dining experience.

Thornsberry and his business partners opened The Ranch after the closing of 44 Prime, a Starkville steakhouse. Thornsberry designed the new menu around flavors from across the Southeast, with dishes ranging from chorizo and shrimp hush puppies to skillet cornbread and Mississippi fried catfish.

“We stick with a theme...we take inspiration from the Appalachian Mountains down through Florida, all the way over to Louisiana,” Thornsberry said. “We’re kind of a melting pot of all the flavors of the American Southeast.”

Thornsberry’s cooking is influenced by his roots in South Carolina and his time abroad in Utrera, Spain.

“It’s really important for us to kind of utilize all this stuff that’s around us in our region, and I think I picked up a lot of that from living over in Spain,” he said. “They’re very much about using your neighbor for what your neighbor does best. And so it’s a really, really cool little thing there... how community-oriented they are.”

As executive chef, Thornsberry is responsible for hiring and instructing other chefs. He said he looks to build a safe environment where his chefs can grow and emphasizes doing things the right way.

“I can teach them the knowledge; what we hire for is attitude and personality. We want to make sure that this person is in it for the right reasons,” Thornsberry said. “I can’t teach somebody how to care, but I can teach them how to cook.”

He said he hopes his customers experience authentic hospitality when they dine at The Ranch.

“We do this because this is what we want to do,” he said. “Our goal is to be involved with the community and for people to come in and feel like we’re part of the neighborhood.”

Abigail Jacob, the head bartender at The Ranch, had never worked in a restaurant before she became a table busser at 44 Prime. From there, she worked her way up to being a server. When 44 Prime lost a bartender two weeks after Jacob’s 21st birthday, she began learning how to bartend.

“I really enjoy the combination of creativity and people that comes with this industry,” she said. “I love a drink that, you know, looks great as well as tastes great.”



Lily Wilson

Jacob eagerly accepted a management position at The Ranch. She is now responsible for training other bartenders, and she expressed pride in the team she has built. She also crafts the drink menu, ensuring every drink is flavorful and balanced. Her favorite cocktail to make is an Old Fashioned, which she appreciates for its simplicity.

“With the touch of sweetness, a little bit of orange and bitters...I just think you can’t beat a classic,” she said.

According to Jacob, the Ranch’s hospitality is what sets it apart.

“More than anything, we want people to feel, like, you know, they can settle in and enjoy themselves,” she said. “Whatever they want to bring into The Ranch, we’re happy to celebrate and accommodate, and I think the best hospitality is when the guest doesn’t have to think about all of the work that’s going on behind the scenes.”

General manager John Ryckert has been in the restaurant business since the 1980s. An experienced veteran of the food industry, he was hired by former coworker Thornsberry to run the front of the house at The Ranch. Everyone from greeters to servers looks to him for direction.

While he used to work with more experienced servers, Ryckert has taken on the role of a teacher now that he is hiring younger staff members. Because it’s located in Starkville, many of his servers are students. This has challenged him to remember his own youth, and he said it revitalized him as a manager.

According to Ryckert, Thornsberry’s vision and passion are what make The Ranch stand out. All the food is made in-house and sourced from local and regional products. Ryckert also points to hospitality as the secret ingredient, claiming that service becomes transactional without it. He wants guests to feel as if they are being welcomed home.

Although The Ranch is new to Starkville, its staff hopes to establish the restaurant as a lasting part of the community.

“We felt like it was an opportunity to make something that we could truly mold into a permanent part of the community,” Thornsberry said.