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Slippery Mermaid operators ride out pandemic summer to successfully launch new Nauti Taco

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Karen Hineman and her family weren't going to let all the unpredictable restrictions from a global pandemic stop them from launching their new restaurant.

"It was full steam ahead and just figure it out as you go along," she said.

After originally opening their Slippery Mermaid to offer a unique take on sushi in Sewickley about five years ago, Hineman and her son and GM Reece Duncan opened similarly themed Nauti Taco a few doors down on Beaver Street. They opened in June, a time when they didn't have a liquor license to help bolster sales along with pandemic restrictions that made take-out trade their best sales option.

Now that Nauti Taco had made through more than two months building a take out business, the restaurant is now opening for indoor dining after a long wait to get a liquor license that now allows them to serve up a selection of margaritas.

"I think we've kind of covered all the bases with this Covid thing," said Hineman. "I guess our business model played right into it."

The basic strategy, said Hineman: "we just kept it very simple."

That translates to a menu of 11 tacos, including popular flavors such as the Florida shrimp taco, along with traditional Mexican sides of beans and rice, along with their new tap system serving up three different flavors of margarita.

A 2,500-square-foot courtyard at the Beaver Street location in the village of Sewickley has been a key resource. It's enabled outdoor dining for 60 under the ongoing restrictions for restaurants to serve at only 25% capacity indoors and to socially distance their guests.

She said they've been able to use it for the Slippery Mermaid's guests as well, allowing interest from the first restaurant to flow into the new one.

Not that Hineman, whose family also operates a Slipper Mermaid restaurant in Florida, isn't wary of the prospects of the pandemic to derail the restaurant's initial success or hopes to be able to soon operate at full capacity.

"We didn't know from day to day," she said of what state restrictions might inhibit the launch of Nauti Taco. "We still don't."

Sidney Sokoloff, a principal of Specialty Group, which assisted Nauti Taco in securing its liquor license, credits Hineman and family for bringing a different twist to traditional foods that's helped to make them successful.

"They take a really unique approach to a traditional food," he said, calling it "a passion of reinventing the wheel."

Tim Schooley

Reporter

Pittsburgh Business Times

SIDNEY SOKOLOFF

The interior of the new Nauti Taco in Sewickley