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Chez Alice Catering Company opens new cafe in Pennington (VIDEO)

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By R. Kurt Osenlund, Pennington Post

The beloved Princeton business has found a new home in the Tree Farm Road complex, where customers can plan events and, of course, dine.

For Kelly Hamdan and Jean Butcher, Chez Alice Catering Company's owner and director of special events, it took a little while to nail down the perfect recipe. The pair have been working together for roughly five years, but only this week have they opened the doors to their very own cafe and catering office, at a suite in the Tree Farm Road complex off Route 31. With close to 50 specialty menu items, fresh baked goods, signature coffees and plenty of space to plan events, the site gives Hamdan and Butcher a handsome and exciting home base.

Not that both women didn't have plenty of exciting things on their plates already. Hailing from Hopewell, Hamdan has owned Chez Alice Catering since 1997, when the business was still parked on Nassau Street in Princeton (it was founded in 1991). In addition moving the operation to Palmer Square in 2005, Hamdan also opened and ran cafes in the Princeton Library and at Hamilton's Grounds for Sculpture. In 2007, she sold the bakery division but kept the catering end, and each separate business retained the Chez Alice name.

"It was hard to separate the delicious catering food from the well-known cakes," Hamdan says, "so we decided to share the name."



Unlike Hamdan, who says she's "always been in the hospitality business," Butcher, a Princeton resident, says she used to work in marketing for MTV Networks in New York City, before settling down to be a stay-at-home mom for a time. Itching to get back to work, she connected with Hamdan, and found Chez Alice to be a terrific fit.

Together, the two women have been whipping up all sorts of events for a grateful batch of clients. Operating out of a commercial kitchen in Lawrenceville, where the business became kosher-certified (it also caters vegan needs), Hamdan and Butcher have fed and entertained guests at weddings, anniversaries, bridal and baby showers, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, holiday parties, birthday parties, Sweet Sixteens, corporate events and more. Helping to facilitate the move to open a cafe location was a 40 percent increase in business over the past year.

"We felt we needed a place to meet clients, hold meetings and also serve walk-in customers," says Hamdan.

"Everyone loved Kelly's other cafes," Butcher says of her partner, "and she had her eye on this spot for a while. Eventually, everything fell into place."

The Chez Alice cafe officially opened for business on Monday at 11 a.m. What can you find when you walk in? An instantly warm and welcoming space, with intimate tables, gold-yellow walls that catch the sunlight, and a central marble counter heaped with freshly-prepared baked goods. Always brewing is Chez Alice's signature blend coffee ("something bold, but not burnt-tasting," Hamdan says), and on the wall, a chalkboard lists the day's specials. Maybe you'll try the quiche du jour, or soup du jour, or house soup – a velvety carrot-ginger bisque. Or perhaps you'll go for the Chez Alice tarragon chicken salad, the sesame linguini, or the turkey, cucumber and French brie sandwich with cream cheese spread.

"My goal here is to go back to the original Chez Alice menu," Hamdan says. "A French-American base with seasonal items. Just yummy, yummy food. Something that isn't Chinese or Italian in Pennington, because there's a lot of that. And some really healthy options, too. People should be very satisfied."

For dessert, guests can enjoy a whole new selection of treats, including red velvet cupcakes, Godiva chocolate cupcakes and peppermint cheesecake. Looking for a classic Chez Alice confection? Hamdan and Butcher can call in a carry-out order for you with the Chez Alice bakery, with whom they still do regular catering business. And what would a cafe be without an artistic atmosphere? The walls of the new Chez Alice spot are decked out with Hamdan's own

photography, and a gift corner has her greeting cards and hand-crafted items, all priced to own.

"She has a great eye," Butcher says of Hamdan.

And a sharp palate, too.

Contact Chez Alice Catering Company at 609-737-1109. Learn more about the menu and full details of the catering business at **www.chezalicecatering.com.*

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