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Business: Retail

More new eateries to help spice up downtown's image

By Rowena Vergara
ROCKFORD REGISTER STAR

[Click here for more information about Rowena Vergara](#)

ROCKFORD — The thinking about downtown Rockford often goes like this: Business owners move out of downtown for better opportunities on the east side, leaving the few local businesses in the heart of the city to struggle. As those businesses struggle, moving to the east side becomes increasingly appealing, and then they end up leaving, ensuring the cycle continues.

It appears Rockford may slowly be moving away from that approach.

New retailers are hoping to bring more vitality and a fresh way of thinking to the center city, and the latest batch of businesses opening in the coming months will offer goods new to downtown. Among them:



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Jeff Jenkins, a special-cuts man at Chuc-a-Luc's, cuts a catfish into steaks and filets Tuesday at the recently opened business at 1104 Elm St. in Rockford.



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Gino Lynn, an assistant at Chuc-a-Luc's Fish Market and Grill, holds an assortment of fresh catfish cuts.



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Charles Doby, owner of Chuc-a-Luc's, 1104 Elm St., stands outside the fish market and grill he recently opened near downtown Rockford.

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What's new downtown

Chuc-a-Luc's Fish Market and Grill: A fresh fish market that will add a restaurant.

- Owner: Charles Doby
- Address: 1104 Elm St.
- Hours: 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday
- Employees: Three
- Opened: Late June

Eden Cafe: A carryout and catering shop focused on sandwiches and salads.

- Owner: Phil Church
- Address: 313 Mulberry St.
- Hours: 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday
- Employees: Five to eight
- Opening: Labor Day weekend or later

Chocolat by Daniel: An upscale chocolate lounge serving desserts and chocolate fondue and coffee, and offering wireless Internet access.

- Owner: Daniel Nelson
- Address: 211 E. State St.
- Hours: 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday through Friday, possibly open until midnight on weekends
- Employees: Currently hiring
- Opening: In September

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Chocolat by Daniel, a chocolate lounge serving desserts, coffee and chocolate fondue, to open at 211 E. State St., the old Sal's Diner location.

Eden Cafe, a sandwich and salad carryout business, to open after Labor Day weekend in the 300 block of Mulberry Street. Owner Phil Church of Rockford will run a carryout and catering business focused on sandwiches and salads.

Cru, a long-awaited wine and cheese lunch and retail establishment in the 500 block of East State Street, expected to open next week.

Already open is Chuc-a-Luc's Fish Market and Grill, a fresh fish market at 1104 Elm St., about three blocks from the Winnebago County jail project. Owner Charles Doby of Rockford plans to open a restaurant component, too.

The opening of these businesses can only spur more growth, which then translates to more shoppers, dwellers and events going on in the center of a city, all of which produce that critical mass necessary for a thriving downtown, said Susan Silberberg, a lecturer in urban design and planning at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a senior vice president of the urban planning firm Community Partners Consultants.

On the flip side, local businesses need support from open-minded residents to survive. "There are a lot of factors that signify progress, and some of it is just public attitude," she said. Downtown businesses "need to be on their radar screen when they think of going to dinner or if they have people visiting from out of town."

Downtown Rockford has seen some positives lately with the opening of Kuma's Asian Bistro on East State Street and Stranded Italian on Madison Street and extended offerings at Paragon Restaurant and Cafe, a combined business of Paragon and Sal's Diner.

"You obviously need a critical mass of stores, restaurants and services to make a downtown work. So, if one new business opens, that's great because change is always incremental," Silberberg said.

Here's a look at some of what's going on downtown.

New development, new business

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About two years ago, a place called Jay's Catfish City on Rockford's west side was considered a little disruptive in the neighborhood, Doby said. But as the building's new owner, Doby, a resident of that neighborhood, promises something different.

That's because Doby hopes to attract workers from the new Winnebago County jail just three blocks away. "They don't have to go out far to get some great food and enjoy themselves in a warm atmosphere. I'm there for them," he said.

In late June, Doby opened Chuc-a-Luc's Fish Market and Grill in the 1,800-square-foot space at 1104 Elm St. He cleaned up the inside of the building and painted it a loud yellow and green.

About 700 pounds of live catfish, tilapia, buffalo and perch captured from the Mississippi River near Galena and Savanna are sold each week, Doby said. Customers can hover over a fish tank, select their wiggling fish and have it prepared to order.

In the coming months, Doby plans to add a full kitchen, offering fried fish sandwiches, Polish sausage, ribs, chicken and other hearty food.

"I want to give my community healthier food because it's fresh every day. The meat and ground beef is fresh every day, and it's better than fast food," he said.

Not just a candy shop

Think the service of Starbucks and the look of a 1920s pharmacy. There will be couches, love seats and tables for after-work meetings or late-night conversations, or for when the show or sporting event ends. Wireless Internet will also be available.

"It's an alternative to the loud, smoky bar scene," said Daniel Nelson of Rockford, the chocolatier who will open Chocolat by Daniel at 211 E. State St.

Nelson plans to offer fine chocolates imported from Belgium, Switzerland, France and Venezuela. The chocolate and sweets-only shop will include a menu laden with white chocolate raspberry cheesecakes, puddings, custards, high-quality coffee and chocolate fondue — all without preservatives.

"I'm not just a guy that's reselling chocolates, and I'm not just a fellow with a couple of recipes," said Nelson, who's traveled to Canada and France to learn from some of those countries' finest chocolatiers and makes desserts for several area restaurants, including Five Forks Market and Kuma's Asian Bistro.

Nelson thought about opening his shop on Perryville Road but was more impressed with the atmosphere and affordability of downtown. Wanting to play up his imported chocolate focus, he found elements in downtown Rockford that reminded him of European streetscapes.

"The shops in Europe are very distinctive. They're old, romantic and amazing, and you just can't get that in the big boxes on Perryville Road. It's got some history to it, and I like going with that flow rather than against it," he said.

He projects to open by On the Waterfront, but for providing liquid refreshments only. He will be "chocolate ready" most likely by the end of September.

Downtown always evolving

Silberberg suggests that any downtown looking to revive itself focus on its historical architecture and charm — elements malls don't have. "People are searching for a sense of history. Build on local character, local history and local businesses," she said.

Shops that offer convenience like a pharmacy or hardware store would also suggest progress for a downtown.

"You want to be able to park your car and go to the post office, drop off your clothes at the cleaner, go to the bookstore and grab a bite to eat," she said.

Second-floor housing above restaurants and shops is also a must, Silberberg added, and Rockford has some of this. An example downtown is the Richardson Building, a 150-year-old downtown building at West State Street and Wyman that's been converted into three units.

Housing is an area the River District Association, downtown's business group, is trying to improve. An inaugural urban living tour sponsored by the association will run from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Aug. 26 in hopes of attracting new dwellers to downtown, and to help developers get the young, urban professionals they need to succeed. This group generally looks for rent tags in the \$500 to \$700 range.

"Zoning that allows for housing above stores puts people on the streets at night and it gives life to downtown," Silberberg said.

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