

How two Charleston entrepreneurs launched beloved fast casual chains

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Kinsey
Gidick



Jonathan Boncek

Meghan Ellenburg prepares a salad at Ladles

If you've ever wondered why the soups at Ladles taste so homey it's because they are all owner Suzie Allen's mother's recipes.

"My Mom is German, and when we came to Charleston there were six kids and my brother is like a giant and he could eat about the amount of three individuals and then you had five other kids. We operated on a minimal income for a long time and that's how she fed everybody. She'd throw a bunch of soup together," says Allen.

Necessity being the mother of invention, Allen's mom managed to come up with a canon of exceptional soups.

But it wasn't until after a career in marketing that her daughter Suzie Allen decided to do something with her mom's recipes. "We took five years and did a bunch of research," she says of her Ladles concept. She knew right out the gate that to make it work, she'd need to do multiples and franchise her business. Allen opened two Ladles the first year and added a third in the second. Ten years later, Ladles has 12 locations with two more in the works, one as far away as Wisconsin. Rather impressive when you look closely at the fast casual restaurant scene.



- Jonathan Boncek

In a world of Panera's and Chipotles and Jimmy Johns — the latter with 2,450 units in the United States, according to restaurantbusinessonline.com — winning diners' loyalty is no easy task for a small local chain. And yet, places like Allen's Ladles and Sam and Jennifer Ferrebee's counter service salad concept Verde, have won their way into Charlestonians' hearts. Timing, of course, hasn't hurt. The Hartman Group's Dining Out 2016 report found that consumers now list "freshness" as a key marker of quality in restaurants, and in operating in the past decade, the two chains have capitalized on this health conscious counter service trend. But they've also distinguished themselves in Charleston's booming food scene by living up to Holy City citizens' exacting culinary expectations.

Allen chalks up Ladles success to three things: 1) Quality — "I think the food is fabulous. When I'm not there I crave it and I've been doing this for 10 years," she says. 2) Ambiance — "We're trying to keep the stores warm, family friendly and we're picky about the people we're franchising to," she adds. And, of course, 3) Price. Ladles' soups start at \$3.25 for a cup and that includes a piece of bread.

But even with that finely tuned business plan, Allen admits that getting Ladles up and running had its challenges every step of the way. Vetting future franchisees for instance isn't as simple as choosing between chili or lemon chicken recipes. But Allen's always been open minded about potential owners.

Location Details **Ladles Soups**

68 Cannon St.

Downtown

Charleston, SC

(843) 579-2855

Soup & Salad



"I've got a kid in Ohio. He's a graduate from Ohio State with a degree in city engineering. We met him dirt bike riding years ago when he was 19 years old. He loved the idea of Ladles being healthy, made to order, and he wanted to bring that to this area," Allen says. "He didn't even know how to make a grilled cheese sandwich." But that didn't prevent Allen from training the kid up.

Once Allen has deemed an applicant worthy and able, a future Ladles owners must come to Charleston for three months of "Ladles school" as she calls it. "We train them from the ground floor up," she says. That means studying the business model, how to source, customer service, not to mention learning a book of about 400 different soup recipes. Then, once operational, a franchisee must follow the Ladles "bible," a guide book that includes rules and regulations for recipes, pricing, and sourcing.

But the key to success in owning a Ladles, Allen believes, is in mastering fast casual customer service.

"The main reason people come back and want to keep coming back is because the owners get to know them," says Allen. "They'll walk in the door and they'll be like 'Hey John.' They feel special, they bring their friends. Our repeat business is ridiculous. It's not like McDonalds."

The same can be said for Verde.

Six years ago, hospitality vets Jennifer and Sam Ferrebee were frustrated. All they wanted was a healthy, fast joint to pick up a salad for dinner but they couldn't find one in Charleston



- Jonathan Boncek
- Verde's Give Peach a Chance Pesto Panzanella

"We knew what we wanted was in other markets," says Jennifer. "I feel like six years ago the level of fast casual wasn't really in Charleston yet. This was pre-Daily, pre-Persimmon, pre-Huriyali. When we would travel to D.C. or New York, we could get fast/casual food that was more than stuff being dumped out a bag. Food was actually being prepped and served in a fast nature. That was missing in Charleston."

That epiphany was all it took.

Location Details [Verde](#)

[347 King St.](#)

[Downtown](#)

[Charleston, SC](#)

[\(843\) 579-2884](#)

[Lunch & Dinner](#)

[Vegetarian + Organic and Soup & Salad](#)



"We worked from the moment the light bulb went off. Driving back from DC the next day, we started writing a business plan," she says. Today Verde has grown to four locations in Charleston and Jennifer attributes a good portion of the salad and wrap concept's success to holding fast on the price.

"That's been part of our business plan from day one, price," says Jennifer. "I hated when lunch pushed about \$10. You can always get something at Verde for under \$10. Our base create-your-own salad is \$6.95."

Of course, you could easily go crazy with the toppings and hit the \$15+ mark if you want, but that's not the point. For the Ferrebees, Verde's success hinges on affordability.

"It's always a tricky balance. We prep all of our produce and make all of our proteins. We roast our chicken in house, roast our beets, all of our cookies made from scratch. It's a lot of production, but it's always the value that is so important."