

Cohen's Retreat owner finds inspiration in building

BY KATIE NUSSBAUM

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Colleen Smith's love for Cohen's Retreat began long before she purchased the Skidaway Road property five years ago and transformed it into one of Savannah's most unique restaurants and retail spaces.

"I have a real connection with this building. As a child, like many of the youth in Savannah, I would come here and sing during Christmas holidays and visit often with different service clubs and organizations, so it was a sentimental attachment to it," Smith said of the former nursing home.

Known in its early days as "The 'Cohen's Old Man's Retreat'" and named for Percival Randolph Cohen, the structure was constructed in the mid-1930s and served as a nursing home until it closed in the 1980s. Cohen, a notable Savannah businessman, left the funds in his will to build the home. It was then used as a dorm facility for athletes training at nearby Savannah State University during the Olympics and later became a furniture store.



Purchased five years ago by Colleen Smith, Cohen's Retreat, a former nursing home on Skidaway Road, has been transformed into one of Savannah's most unique restaurants and retail spaces. (Photo courtesy of Cohen's Retreat)

During her college years, while the nursing home was still in operation, Smith befriended a resident named John, who shared Smith's love of art. After he passed away, she didn't return for some time, but later when the building went up for sale, Smith purchased it and began bring-

ing her vision to create a destination for art, food and community to life.

"I live at Isle of Hope, so as I would go by I couldn't stand to see it. It was just deteriorating every day, so my vision for the place actually came from a love of this property and this building and the history

of Savannah," Smith said, adding that the inspiration behind Cohen's has also been largely influenced by matriarch of Ossabaw Island, Eleanor "Sandy" Torrey West and her Genesis project, which brought artists, musicians and writers to Ossabaw

"If you've met Sandy,

then you know, her heart is as big as the world, and she just wanted a place for people to come and put the business, the rush and the noise aside for a while and just have this oasis and Ossabaw is such a gorgeous setting for that,"

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Smith said.

“With Percy’s legacy and Sandy’s vision together, that kind of guides us onto the path of inspiration for ourselves and our guests.”

Now in its fifth year, the retreat offers lunch and dinner in four uniquely decorated dining rooms and bar areas. A portrait of Mr. Cohen looks out over the tables in the main dining room, while walking canes and wildlife relics and grand chandeliers flank the other dining areas.

The menu includes Low-country favorites like crab cakes, shrimp and grits and deviled eggs, but Smith said she never went into the venture with the mindset that I would be running a restaurant. Initially Smith looked for a chef to run the restaurant, but after realizing she didn’t have a say in the type of experience her guests had, she closed the restaurant for about three months to reevaluate that model and do some repairs around the property.

“There’s a myth that there have been different own-

ers, but we’ve been here the whole time, it’s just evolved,” she said.

The relationship with Cohen’s current chef has been a natural fit, she said.

“There’s a good synergy between us. He knows instinctively what’s going to make me happy. It’s one of those situations where you don’t have to talk a lot because you just know what each other are thinking, so that has been a nice surprise,” Smith said.

Retail and event space

The retreat also includes the Brown Dog Market, a retail area comprised of several spaces that feature a variety of unique products from jewelry and handbags to greeting cards and home décor.

“We see more community inspired ideas there now that are evolving,” Smith said of the market.

“What we’re going to do in 2018 is infuse a lot of locally made products that make Savannah unique and seek out those people who are starting out and launching their own artistic endeavors and we’d like to be a show-

case and platform for those folks.”

Fresh off their annual retail pop-up shop held earlier this month, Smith said Cohen’s will also be hosting more community events in the coming year.

“We have wonderful attendance, so that told us people love events and experiences and that’s what we want to offer more of. We listened and we’re delivering on that next year,” she said.

While Cohen’s remains a popular destination for weddings, reunions and parties, this month they’re launching another event space, the Clubhouse.

Located behind the main structure, the clubhouse was built in the 1970s, formerly served as a community center for residents. The cottages behind the building, which were also built in the 1970s, serve as vacation rentals, artist’s space and bridal bungalows for weddings.

“We’re going to kind of bring back that in a fun artistic way so that can be booked for private parties,” she said.

While the concept of Cohen’s Retreat is unique in itself, Smith said the

location also gives visitors a glimpse into another side of Savannah, which includes nearby Pin Point, Bethesda, Isle of Hope and Wormsloe State Historic Site and she hopes to continue to promote those areas in the coming years.

“There’s more of Savannah to see than downtown and I like to say we’re sort of the uptown choice. We’re off the beaten path, but they can get to us with the Truman (Parkway),” she said.

The journey during the last five years has been a series of developments and growth for Smith, but she hasn’t gotten there on her own and said the success of Cohen’s is due in large part to her team.

“I’ve learned a lot in the last five years, and I’ve tried to grow from each experience and I’m so grateful for each chapter and the ability to work with the different folks that I did because I learned so much from all of them,” she said.

“I’m excited about the future. I’m really, really excited about where we’re headed. Everybody has worked really hard to be there and I think the future looks pretty bright.”