

Zeke's Beans & Bowls takes its time and invites customers to do the same

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If fast food is your style, then Zeke's Beans & Bowls is not the place for you.

Owners Nicholas Vitale and Mike Schirmer take great pride in that.

Zeke's - named after Zeke Sanders, a good friend of the owners who died in 2006 - is "a poke, açai, coffee joint," as described by Vitale. Its best-selling menu item is the Keali'i Special Poke Bowl, which is tuna, seaweed salad and spicy sriracha. It is named after the head chef and now business partner, Keali'i Canino.



"Poke is traditional Hawaiian-style food," Vitale said. "It's a cubed, sushi-grade, raw tuna, marinated to order, served with rice, avocado or seaweed salad. Imagine a deconstructed sushi roll where the fish is the centerpiece as opposed to the rice."

Vitale and Schirmer discussed opening a restaurant featuring the cuisine they had tried during their surfing travels. Açai is popular in Puerto Rico, and poke is an authentic Hawaiian dish. At the time, Vitale was living in Venice, Calif., and visiting Schirmer at his bar, The Boxx, at the Virginia Beach Oceanfront.

"I grew up in Virginia Beach, and it was always home," Vitale said. "So coming back to open up a restaurant was very easy because I took all the things I'd learned in New York, Los Angeles and across the country, and I applied it to my hometown."

The café opened in Virginia Beach in June 2013 and attracts people of all walks of life, from college students to families to those from out of town who have heard about the cuisine.

"We attract people who are a little more health-conscious and aware of the realities of what it takes to make natural food," Vitale said. "Everything's made to order, so we don't have everything in the back sitting in a freezer ready to be handed to you. It's all blended to order, and all the juices are pressed fresh. To get that freshness, it takes time."

"Our entire society has been so much on this path of 'quicker, faster, I don't care about content I just want it immediately,'" he continued. "My grandmother used to make the most delicious meals I've ever had in my life, and it didn't happen in two minutes. It takes time. We wanted to take that step back so people can take a second to appreciate the things that are going on around them. Instead of walking in, getting your coffee and leaving, it takes a couple minutes, which gives you the opportunity to sit down, admire the artwork on the wall and have a conversation with the person next to you."

"I think people started getting more around the environment and sense of community as opposed to just the end product. When people really started to appreciate that, it became a little more obvious what we

were trying to do."

Zeke's opened on Granby Street in April of this year, joining the arts district, which is what attracted Vitale to the area.

"I have friends in the neighborhood, and I knew they were doing great things down here," he said. "I knew it was on the up-and-up, and with us being what I like to think of as a cultural and creative-focused establishment, it seemed that we would fit right in."

Evidently, Zeke's been well received.

Marina E. of Virginia Beach wrote in an online review: "Zeke's goes above and beyond on every aspect of a restaurant. Most importantly, their food, every poke or açai bowl, is always consistently fresh and delicious! Their tuna is top-quality and just so tender and flavorful. Also, they serve Three Ships Coffee, which is made fresh to order and tastes good black. The icing on the cake is the amazing customer service. Every single worker has always been very helpful and friendly toward me on every visit. The welcome feeling of both the Norfolk and Beach location compels me to go back time and time again!"

For Vitale, the hardest part of opening the café was, well, running a business.

"I like to think that I'm the creative guy; I can decorate the walls to make them pretty, but I don't know how to eliminate our overhead or cut back on our payroll options," he said.

"I am very fortunate to have such a great friend in Mike Schirmer who had the business education and the knowledge of how to run a business. I became the student, and he taught me a million things that I would never have known or cared to know."

When it comes to Zeke's, Vitale, Schirmer and Canino are taking things one step at a time.

"We're always open for the next step, but our biggest thing right now is making sure that whatever we do, we do it right," Vitale said. "We'd much rather nurture each restaurant and keep our eyes and ears open for future possibilities. We're looking to grow a lot of our own vegetation in our garden back here, so that's our goal for the springtime.

"The arts district is up and coming, but it needs work and support. Instead of it being just the drive-through from downtown to Ghent, I'd love to encourage people to come check out what's happening in the neighborhood. And not even just at Zeke's, in general. There's so many fun things happening in this neighborhood, and there's a great energy. Even in the couple months we've been here, we've seen huge growth as far as foot traffic and people just hanging out. It's a good time right now, and I invite all folks to come in and enjoy it."

