Jana’s weekend soul food turns grumps to gluttons

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Spicy crab omelets and grouper Rueben once drew many natives of The Plains to Jana’s Soul Food Café on Sundays.

But just five years after opening, owner Jana Durham has found herself seated closer to Court Street and catering to a very different demographic after her restaurant was destroyed in last year’s September tornado.

Jana’s met its demise when a tree fell on it during the storm.

“The tree engulfed the entire (café),” Durham said. “It was actually quite beautiful. We just laughed, and then we cried. (It) seemed unbelievable.”

Durham said the building was beyond repair, but she donated all leftover food, tables and chairs to local charities.

After the news broke, Durham said she received a call from Art Oestrike, owner of Jackie O’s Pub & Brewery, 24 W. Union St.

“When (Art) heard about (the damage), he called and said, ‘Just bring your business (to Jackie O’s). We’ll run it out of here,’ ” Durham said. “And that was a very kind and generous offer on his end.”

Oestrike, who dined weekly at Jana’s, said the original idea to bring Durham to Jackie O’s stemmed from wanting to help the community and to revive his favorite brunch.

“I had been eating (at Jana’s) on Sundays,” Oestrike said. “And all the sudden, it was gone for a month.”

Oestrike offered Durham and her entire cooking staff a temporary position at Jackie O’s. The position soon turned permanent, though, and now — a year after the disaster — Durham can be found at Jackie O’s every Saturday and Sunday cooking brunch.
Joe Kunkel, front-of-the-house manager at Jackie O’s, said a few of Durham’s dishes have already become hits among pub clientele. The spicy crab omelet is one that continues to be a favorite among customers, Kunkel said.

And while Durham said she did lose some former customers, Kunkel said the typical Sunday brunch reels in 50 to 75 customers.

“There’s just love in the food,” Durham said. “I care that you’re paying for this. It needs to be the best it can be.”

Most of the ingredients used in Durham’s dishes are grown at a Jackie O’s-owned farm located off Angel Ridge Road. Oestrike started the farm in March and grows an assortment of vegetables to be used at the pub and brewery.

“We love feeding people good food,” Durham said. “I mean, I love to watch grumpy people come in, and then we feed them and they’re happy.”

With a kitchen at her fingertips and locally grown food at her disposal, Durham said she has no plans of moving from Jackie O’s any time soon.

“After this year, nothing looks the same. That’s what it’s about,” Durham said. “I’m here. Art will have to fire me to get rid of me.”