



Spirits Tavern



The building was once a rowdy pool hall and then it became a dimly lit bar known for its cheap well drinks and sticky floor. Sabrina Walker looked at the building on Dahlonega's Main Street, cocked her head thoughtfully, and saw potential for another incarnation. "I wanted to offer gourmet burgers and other good, creative food made from the finest, freshest ingredients to be washed down with high-end craft cocktails," she says.

But first, the building would require an extensive renovation. "It was a total mess," she recalls. "It had to be completely gutted from the ground up and completely rewired," she says. She had heard about ACE through word of mouth. "I got a business plan together, and then it was 'go time,'" she recalls. "Our building ended up costing \$120,000 to remodel, and ACE provided \$66,000 of that, for us to spend on inventory and equipment."

She and her husband, David, opened Spirits Tavern on Halloween of 2014. "The name is a double entendre," she says. "Spirits referring to alcohol, of course, but also my husband and I are Halloween nuts who have a fascination with the paranormal. And, yes, we do think our building is haunted. Dahlonega is a town with a lot of history."

The restaurant -- now airy and sleekly modern with a state-of-the-art kitchen and antique Victorian lamps in the restrooms -- since has become a popular dining destination in north Georgia, offering a dozen different dressings (green tomato chow chow, pimento cheese, etc.) for burgers prepared from White Oak grass-fed beef, and other dishes made from Springer Mountain Farms chicken and veggie burgers. "Animal welfare is very important to us, so we use only the best, cruelty-free ingredients," Walker says. Cocktails -- and "mocktails" -- feature unusual ingredients such as fresh muddled mints and house-made ginger beer. The Spirits concept proved intriguing enough to get written up in Rachael Ray's foodie magazine.

Spirits typically features live music on the weekends, standup comedy, trivia nights, and a variety of fund-raisers for area charities. "We want to give back to the community," she says, noting that her business employs 22 workers. "Most of them who started with us are still here. We depend on a highly trained, professional -- and fun -- staff."

Walker holds a hospitality degree with a specialty in food and beverage, and she worked in country club catering for several years. "In the course of my work, I saw policies and practices that I thought didn't work," she says, "so I tried to acquire as much acumen as I could and then implement my ideas. ACE enabled me to do this; I couldn't have done it without their help. It's hard work, but it's fun work because it's ours."

And even the ghosts, she says, seem happy with the changes.