

## Street tacos

### New eatery finds home on Hickory

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Heather Dorris, the general manager at Denton's new Rusty Taco, is determined to make the right taco.

"We have a barbecue taco with extra sauce," she says as she puts together one of the restaurant's signature tacos during opening day June 3.

Before becoming the general manager at Rusty Taco, Dorris was the executive chef at the Fort Worth Boat Club for two months and spent time as a sous chef at the Stoneleigh Hotel in Uptown Dallas and the Sheraton Market Center.

She has been around the kitchen for a long time and made it official, she said, when she graduated from Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Dallas in October 2010. In May 2012, she was named one of four top Rising Star Chefs in the Dallas Food & Wine Festival contest when she competed against 18 chefs from around North Texas.

Before she decided to join the Rusty Taco team three months ago, Dorris spent eight hours at a Rusty Taco in Dallas and watched the entire work process.

"The way they do their food is fresh, and that is exactly what I did when I was a cook," she said. "I love being a chef and being a cook. I want to impact people and this is way to do it. The customer here gets to see everything. It is perfect."

Dorris is among 34 employees who now work at the restaurant.

"I am overwhelmed that I have talent like her working with us," said Conner Cupit, owner and CEO of Greenbriar Restaurant Holdings LLC, which owns the restaurant on East Hickory Street.

Cupit said the idea of bringing Rusty Taco to Denton began three years ago. He began having discussions with Rusty Fenton, founder of the popular Dallas chain, to find a location in Texas, and he waited until the right location came along.

"We were really blessed to have the opportunity to get this piece of property in addition to the primary building to do this patio," Cupit said. "For us to do something like this, and the city allowing us to do this, makes all the difference."

The 1,800-square-foot restaurant is at 210 E. Hickory St., in the former location of Ramen Republic. The space was remodeled inside and out, including a 1,000-square-foot patio.

Cupit said when he went to the city to explain his concept, he described it wanting to create a place that would "feel like your favorite pair of broken-in blue jeans. ... It has to have a little swagger to it, and it has to be comfortable."

That includes live music, a 65-foot picnic bench on the patio, and a menu of tacos for \$2.50 and under. The patio also has 60-inch television screens, and pets are allowed to hang out with guests there.

"The patio experience is extremely important to us," Cupit said. "This is the first of its kind in the Rusty Taco collection of restaurants."

Dallas-based Jones Baker Interiors & Architecture designed the restaurant, and Bengé General Contracting of Rowlett worked on the project. Sean Starr of Denton's Starr Studios painted the signs. The project took about six months to complete, Cupit said.

"It looks totally different to me on the inside," said Julie Glover, the city's economic development program administrator. "The design makes a huge difference to how the whole strip looks now."

The previous tenant, Ramen Republic, spent about two years at the same corner, Glover said.

"It was empty for a long time about 10 to 15 years ago," she said. "It used to be a cash register store at some point, and it was also an antique store. There was not a lot of foot traffic there."

Cupit, originally from Longview, has a total of 15 years of restaurant experience. He says he began like everyone else — working tables — as a 16-year-old.

He went on to study business, earning a bachelor's at Baylor University and a master's at Southern Methodist University. His business background includes working at Brinker International and PepsiCo Frito-Lay.

Cupit said Rusty Taco has been so well received in Denton that he's already adjusted the business hours. He said he likes the town's feel, from the people he has been able to hire for his first franchise location, to the community he is now able to serve.

"Denton, to me, is what Austin wants to be," Cupit said.

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