

Small Business of the month



The biggest challenge, say the owners of Tropical Smoothie Cafe, is to get the message out that the franchise has good, healthy food made with real ingredients. Pictured here is a team from the Schillinger Road location. The company also owns the Legacy Village location off Dauphin Street. On the left in front is **Nazmi Ozokur** and behind him, his partner **Billy Cox**.

Franchise Owners Take a Leap of Faith with Tropical Smoothie Cafe

What happens when a nuclear pharmacist and a Turkish immigrant put their heads together? When it's **Billy Cox** and **Nazmi Ozokur**, you get an award-winning Tropical Smoothie Cafe franchise.

Tropical Smoothie Cafe (TSC) is the Mobile Area Chamber's Small Business of the Month and the Destin, Fla.-based company's top-ranking catering franchisee for 2011.

Ozokur came to Mobile from Turkey when his brother, who was earning a master's degree at the University of South Alabama, encouraged him to come to America. "I enrolled in the ESL (English as a Second Language) program, coming from Turkey in 2001 with \$900 in my pocket," he remembers.

Looking for work, Ozokur started what turned out to be a career with

T.G.I. Friday. When a management position took him to Jacksonville, Fla., he discovered TSC and started eating lunch there two or three times a week.

Ozokur moved back to Mobile to connect with family and went to work as a manager at The Wine Loft, where he met Cox. At the time, Cox had sold his business and was locked into a three-year non-compete agreement. He began looking for investments, which led him to open The Wine Loft.

Ozokur gave TSC's franchise information to several people, encouraging them to pursue the opportunity, but now he's glad no one else was interested. To push himself beyond his comfort zone, he gave two months notice and began the process of owning a Tropical Smoothie Cafe restaurant.

"It's a little like sky-diving. I jumped with a little faith, a little confidence and a little experience. That's how it started."

He opened his first TSC in 2008 at Legacy Village and eight months later established the Schillinger Road location near the Airport Boulevard intersection in west Mobile. There are a total of 10 full-time and 27 part-time employees at the two locations.

In response to leading the company in catering sales, Ozokur says, "When it comes to catering, the answer is always 'yes.'" TSC delivers from Gulfport, Miss., to Gulf Shores, including dropping off smoothies to St. Paul's High School for the school's fundraising efforts and the restaurant's newest catering contract to provide hundreds of lunches to Austal.

Of his business partner, Cox says, "Nazmi is the driving force, the reason

for success. "It's a great concept, but he knows how to run the business."

The biggest challenge Ozokur faces is that people don't know the cafe has food. TSC, open from 6:30 a.m. to 9 p.m., has a full menu of wraps, sandwiches, salads and smoothies. "We use high-quality ingredients, including fresh fruit and natural sugar," says Ozokur. "Our motto is eat better – feel better."

The company rewards its customers with coupons delivered right to their cell phones and even hosts a nutritional calculator for its menu on its tropicalsmoothie.com website.

Go to mobilechamber.com/award.asp to submit a Small Business of the Month nomination, or contact Danette Richards at 431-8652 or d Richards@mobilechamber.com.