



## 'Fresh, Local and Incredible'

Why people drive hours to experience the unique food, music and art of one of Mentone's signature restaurants

story and photos by STEVEN STIEFEL

**T**HE WARM ATMOSPHERE THAT GREET'S PATRONS OF Wildflower Café in Mentone, Ala., is enchanting. Upon entering, one's senses are treated to unique sights, sounds and scents. The experience encapsulates the passions of owner Laura Catherine Moon.

"It's a reflection of the things I love: art, food, creating, music, people, entertaining, Mentone and, of course, wildflowers," she says.

She describes the eclectic scene as a "shabby-chic" environment.

"Things don't have to be so polished and stuffy to be classy," she says. "You walk in, and it feels like you could come here in a prom dress or you could come in wearing overalls or sweatpants and sit next to someone who is enjoying a romantic meal and not feel awkward at all, simply because of the vibe."

Moon tells her staff to treat guests as if they are family.

"I tell them to imagine this person is your long-lost aunt that you haven't seen in years," she says. "Make them feel at home. I don't meet a stranger, ever, no matter where I am, but it isn't about one person. The story of the Wildflower is about family and a team of people who work together to create a warm, friendly ambiance and delicious food."

She originally saw the Wildflower Café's Country Store as a place to sell handmade products such as her lip balm, herbal teas and moisturizing skin serum (she jokes she uses it daily and is actually 75). But

something more appealed to the self-admitted "foodie."

"I've spent a lot of time traveling all over the U.S., France, Italy, Spain and Monte Carlo, tasting dishes and bringing those ideas back to Mentone, making them my own," she says. "I love fresh, local and incredible food. I felt that Wildflower Café would be a great thing to be a part of and an appropriate name because I have studied native edible and medicinal plants and wildflowers since 2005."

She says seven years ago, Margaret Baker, the original owner, was skeptical whether Mentone residents and visitors would respond well to Moon's proposed menu full of natural, organic, gluten-free options.

"She thought I would do a great job, but didn't think it would go over," Moon says. "Six months later, she changed her mind and allowed me to buy in as co-owner and make changes to co-create what Wildflower is today."

For the first three years, Moon says, she didn't promote that the restaurant doesn't use hydrogenated oils, artificial colors or flavors or MSG. "I was afraid people would think that it would taste bad if they knew it was healthy," she explains. "But then after the word got out that Wildflower's food was great, I started to promote all of these things we were doing because honestly, to me, offering fresh foods that have natural flavors and aren't over-seasoned or salty is better. Fresh and healthy is always better because of the quality of the ingredients."

Although there have been several owners, Moon has dedicated her-



self to establishing consistency while making Wildflower Café her own, unique place.

"Many of the recipes are my own, although I've kept some recipes from the past owners," she says.

The signature item on the menu is the tomato pie, which she features in many different entrée combinations. The garlic Parmesan dipping sauce also serves as a crowd-pleaser.

"Our burgers and steaks are fresh-ground and hormone-free, as are all of our meats," she says. "Our salmon is wild caught. Someone can also get a vegan or vegetarian meal." Gluten-free items include a peanut-butter pie.

The food may be delicious, but it's just one part of the formula.

"The meals are combined with music and local art, and each are equally interconnected and important," Moon says.

Musicians normally sit near the front entrance, their sounds carrying throughout the restaurant and store. Singer Tony Goggans roams from room to room, joking with customers while leading them in song.

"Tony gets everyone involved and having fun," Moon says. "Larry Joe soothes you with a Cat Stevens feel. Amanda Quarrels sings Sarah McLachlan songs like an angel. You wouldn't believe how many times musicians have stopped by and broken out into a jam session. A bluegrass band came through one time and wanted to look around. They broke out their instruments and started playing on our front porch."

In addition to Moon's wares, Wildflower Café's Country Store sells local handmade pottery and jewelry, chainsaw art, woodcarvings and paintings.

Having elevated life to an art form of its own, Moon is penning her memoir, to be titled "Experiencing Life Barefoot." She speaks to garden clubs, participates in workshops at Tranquility Campground and Desoto State Park and writes about native plants for Mentone's newspaper, The Groundhog.

"I lived in the woods with no electricity or running water for three years," she says. "I cooked on a wood stove and raised my daughter out there until



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Wildflower owner Laura Catherine Moon; Dishes are made from natural ingredients and hormone-free meats; The restaurant's cozy interior; Works by local artists are displayed inside and outside.

she was nearly four. I love living near the river with all of the ecological biodiversity and wild plants that are around here. It's been a field school for me."

A spiritual connection to the land is what roots the Birmingham native to Mentone. After a time living in West Hollywood, working as a model, she sought something more real and earthy.

"A lot of people tell me that I would make a lot more money if I moved Wildflower to Huntsville, Atlanta or Birmingham, but that would take me away from what I love," she says.

Still, she admits to feeling pride whenever she's in a faraway town and hears of her restaurant's reputation for excellence.

"I love it whenever someone says they've heard of us," she says. "It's amazing to me how many people actually make a special trip from Birmingham or Atlanta just to eat here. A lot of synchronistic opportunities seem to happen here. People run into friends they haven't seen in 15 years. I've lost track of how many couples have become engaged here."

Moon says she wanted Wildflower Café to be open seven days a week because, when she started out with it, there wasn't much for people to do in Mentone during the week.

"What I wanted to provide was a place to sell my herbs, a place that local artists could display their work, a place where people could shop and eat and connect to hear live music," she says. "There was no place in Mentone at that time to do all of that."

While Mentone appears to be thriving as never before, Moon's café continues to stand out like a beautiful flower discovered blossoming along a well-worn path. It is a sight, sound and taste worth experiencing first-hand. 🌸

*Wildflower Café offers catering and is available for events, meetings and private parties. Call 256-634-0066 to make reservations or check holiday hours. Moon recently added singing to her list of talents. See a video of her singing with Tony Goggans at [lookoutalabama.com](http://lookoutalabama.com).*