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## Vitality localizes health food flavor

NEW ORLEANS — At five Vitality locations in south Louisiana, diners can order traditional red beans and rice on Mondays, shrimp gumbo on Fridays and bread pudding every day of the week. But most of the usual fat, sugar or heavily processed ingredients will be missing.

All but one of six Vitality Juice, Java and Smoothie Bar franchises licensed through the Mandeville-based company are in Louisiana, with the sixth in Albuquerque, N.M. While the menus feature indigenous cuisine, the offerings are far from typical.

Founder Catherine Wilbert said the idea for her company sprang from her own frustration in finding healthy, affordable cuisine.

Most Vitality menu items range from \$6 to \$9. On her Web site, she claims America's growing taste for "conscious living" focuses attention on the food they consume and its environmental impact.

Vitality emphasizes organic and natural ingredients. Its Web site, [www.vitalityjuice.com](http://www.vitalityjuice.com), carries a banned items list, which includes hydrogenated fats, MSG and bleached flour. Vitality outlets offer free-range ostrich burgers and organic, no-sugar-added smoothies served in corn-based, compost-ready cups.

Can Vitality's healthy living business model pay off in Louisiana? Fatimah Conley-Mayfield and her business partners, Dana Douglas and Chontay McKay, are betting it will.

The 20-something trio, friends from college at Miami University in Ohio, opened their first Vitality franchise at 1205 St. Charles Ave. in October.

Only Douglas, a lawyer, is originally from New Orleans. McKay is a pharmaceutical sales representative from St. Louis who moved after Hurricane Katrina to open the business with her friends. Conley-Mayfield is from Indianapolis but lived in Los Angeles and the New York area before moving here in 2000 with her husband, New Orleans trumpeter Irvin Mayfield, to attend law school.

The New Orleans Vitality store owners believe in holistic approaches to health and are optimistic they can help customers learn to count calories and adopt healthier lifestyles.

“You’ve got to put your money where your mouth is,” Conley-Mayfield said of her willingness to open a health food business in post-Katrina New Orleans. She said she feels blessed to live in a place with such a deeply ingrained cultural heritage, including an unparalleled culinary tradition.

Conley-Mayfield even encourages indulgence every now and then. There is a time and place, she said, for great New Orleans cuisine.

“Savor our local flavor,” she said. “But for people who are here every day, there has to be something else. We can’t eat like tourists every day and live to tell about it.”

Conley-Mayfield said she’s been pleasantly surprised by Vitality’s reception in New Orleans.

Revenues have consistently kept pace with expenses. “Some months, we’re surprised,” she said. The St. Charles Avenue store is one of the company’s top three franchises in lunch, groceries and smoothie sales.

Summer months have been a little slow, she said, but things will pick up again when school starts next month.

Conley-Mayfield is also surprised by some customers attracted to her store. Some are people who “wouldn’t be considered our typical demographic.”

On a recent weekday, Vitality served a diverse crowd of lunch customers, including a few well-heeled housewives and a couple in for smoothies after a workout.

There were also at least five construction workers. On his break from a nearby renovation job, Austin Tillotson bypassed the Popeye’s a block away to try Vitality for the first time.

“It’s not bad,” he said, as he ate the last few bites of his turkey burger.

Wilbert said she’s been “thrilled” by local response to the Vitality concept.

“I had people tell me, ‘Are you insane? You’ll never sell wheatgrass in New Orleans, Louisiana.’ And we sell a ton of wheatgrass. I believe that everything is about education,” Wilbert said.