

Business Focus: Syringa's owners 'living the dream'

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Autumn and Viljo Basso are the owners of Syringa Japanese Cafe and Sushi Bar in Coeur d'Alene.

Information

For a taste of contemporary Japanese food, check out Syringa Japanese Cafe and Sushi Bar at 1401 N. Fourth St. in Coeur d'Alene. Reservations are recommended; call 664-2718. Syringa is open Monday from noon to 4 p.m.;

Tuesday through Thursday from noon to 9 p.m.; Friday from noon to 10 p.m., and Saturday from 4 to 10 p.m. It is closed on Sunday.

When Viljo and Autumn Basso returned to Coeur d'Alene almost four years ago, they brought a lot more to town than the home furnishings and personal possessions they had in tow. With their belongings, the couple also packed some long-term business plans and, for Viljo, a wide range of culinary knowledge that is now showcased at Syringa Japanese Cafe and Sushi Bar in midtown Coeur d'Alene.

As co-owners of the city's newest Japanese restaurant, the Coeur d'Alene natives have been busy managing their business, which dishes up contemporary Japanese cuisine. With a crew of 11 employees at their 1401 N. Fourth St. location, Viljo and Autumn are also attempting to break the ill-fated tradition that has beset several previous restaurants that came and went through their same building in the past few years.

"We are trying to break the curse of the building," said Viljo Basso, 34, head chef at Syringa.

So far the curse has been lifted. Since Syringa's doors opened 10 months ago, the tables are often occupied, reservations are recommended and the Bassos are proofing and refining their menu for the third time.

"It's been crazy," Basso said. "People like the feel of the restaurant."

Though Syringa has been a hit in town, the Bassos' new business has been a long time in the making.

Viljo Basso, who got his start in the restaurant business at age 12, has amassed a few decades' worth of restaurant know-how in his repertoire. After graduating from Portland's Western Culinary Institute, he had the dream of someday opening his own restaurant, but at that time Syringa wasn't anything more than a fictitious restaurant in a business plan the culinary school required the students to prepare. Even then, Idaho was still in his mind as was the name Syringa, the name of Gem State's state flower.

That was in the mid-1990s, a few years after the couple had graduated from their respective Coeur d'Alene high schools and started on their roundabout journey back to their hometown.

"We always referred to it as home," said Autumn Basso, 31, who is also the restaurant's manager.

Their plans took a turn northward when Viljo Basso's internship with the restaurant Rover's – a well-known French cuisine-inspired restaurant in Seattle – became a full-time chef position after he graduated from culinary school. While at Rover's, he also moonlighted at a Japanese restaurant, which kept thoughts of sushi and foreign flavors swirling in the back of his mind.

After a few years in the city, the couple still yearned to return to their small-town roots in the city by the lake.

"We went back and forth on what we should do," Autumn Basso said.

Friends and family in Coeur d'Alene offered some guidance and support, including Viljo Basso's longtime friend, Frank Clover, who also started his own business, River City Animal Hospital in Post Falls, where he is a veterinarian.

"As long as I've known Viljo he has done food," Clover said. "I know this is what he always wanted to do – to start his own business. And he certainly has shown to be quite entrepreneurial."

In 2002, the Bassos' married and made the move back to Idaho. Autumn started her own home sewing business while Viljo Basso started cooking at the downtown Japanese restaurant, Takara.

"Without the experience there, we wouldn't have this now," he said, pointing out to the dining area of Syringa.

Before they decided to start their own business, the couple had one other major change in life as they welcomed a baby boy, Ezra, into the family. One year and several months after the new addition, the Syringa decision was made.

"We decided, 'Let's do it,' " Viljo said, "It is all about that first step."

There wasn't much in the way of Japanese cuisine in the area and those lingering thoughts from Viljo Basso's part-time gig spurred the decision. Some friends told them about the vacant building and Syringa soon moved in.

"I think the best compliment we have had so far is 'Thank you for being here!' " Autumn Basso said.

The restaurant came along at just the right time for her, allowing her to close the home sewing shop in favor of the crowds the restaurant attracted. "It was a nice break to talk to people," she said.

Since then the two have poured in more than 100 hours a week to get the restaurant off the ground.

They have also been fortunate in keeping the same hardworking staff since the place opened, Viljo Basso said.

"That allows us to do even more because we don't have to keep retraining employees," he said.

The phrase "living the dream" can be defined in a number of ways. The Basso family is defining it as they go. Though cautious to say so, Viljo Basso likes how things are going and where they are headed.

"It is a successful business so far," he said, though he added that it is still early to really tell. "(We are) living the dream – I have a great wife, a great kid. It's awesome."