

Nine months ago, Donna Smith and her husband, Steve, opened their catfish restaurant, Dip Net. The dining room, once an auto body shop, has been redesigned with refurbished wood and tin. A chandelier made of Tabasco bottles, created by Smith, her husband and their oldest son, Luke, acts as a center piece to the country-style design, and a variety of antique windows and doors, used as wall décor, add an elegant finish.

Smith grew up outside San Antonio and her husband was raised in Fort Worth. They met in San Antonio and have been married almost 28 years. They moved to Hopkins County 24 years ago and have two children, 18-year-old Luke and 14-year-old Drake.

Smith and her husband had been considering opening a new restaurant for a while. They opened their first restaurant, Big Smith's BBQ and a barbecue catering company, 23 years ago. Since then, Smith said they have wanted to build a restaurant that would have the "wow" factor.

"We had all these ideas of how to do the interior of a restaurant dining room," Smith explained, "to make a dining room that Sulphur Springs people would be able to take their guests, and their guests would go, 'wow, this is a neat place.' It took us nine months to do this dining room. It took a lot to put it together. We just felt like Sulphur Springs needed something that was different from anything else."

For months, Smith and her husband listed possible names for their new restaurant. They went through each name, weighing the pros and cons of each, before settling on Dip Net. They looked at several different buildings downtown, but Smith says they couldn't find anything that appealed to them.

"A big problem in town was none of the places had parking — you had to share with other people," Smith said. "Customers shouldn't have to walk two blocks to get to your business. Our real estate lady suggested this place. We came and looked at it and made an offer."

The owner of the former auto shop accepted the Smith's offer, and Dip Net opened in November 2012.

Smith noted that Dip Net customers come from the Mount Pleasant, Mineola and Tyler areas in addition to Hopkins County patrons. Two men from Tyler stopped by after hearing about the interior of the dining room and the quality of the food. They took a menu intending to bring their wives back with them soon. Smith says one of the reasons so many people come to their restaurant is because of their ability to offer tableside service to their customers.

"We constantly were hearing people complain that all the fish places were buffets," Smith said. "People were telling us they didn't like going to a buffet, because they couldn't sit down as a family and visit with each other. Someone's constantly getting up. At Dip Net, they don't have to constantly get up to get their own food. The waitress will bring it to them."

All of the recipes they use in both of their restaurants and catering company have been created by members of the Smith family over the years.

"The four of us can get in the kitchen, and we start playing with spices," Smith explained. "We'll have a bowl of this mix of spices, and a bowl of this. Sometimes we'll have eight different bowls with a different mix of spices."

"There are times," Smith continued, "that we'll play with a recipe for a few days, and then we'll back off of it. Sometimes, we'll wake up at night and go 'a-ha,' and we'll come in that day, and

fix it and it'll be perfect.

Smith said the opening of Dip Net affected her family in a big way. After her eldest son was born, she moved the office for Big Smith's and the catering company to her home, where she was a stay-at-home mom until a year and a half ago. She and her husband never left their children with a babysitter, so unless the boys were at school, Smith was in charge of their care. Now that her boys are older, Smith spends many hours of the day at Dip Net.

"We were always there," Smith explained. "One of us was always there with our kids in everything they did. Now, I'm working more hours. I'd been working, but I had also been a stay-at-home mom for years."

Both of the Smith children have grown up helping their parents in the restaurants. The eldest, Luke, began working at Big Smith's when he was 14 and presently works as an employee of Dip Net. The youngest, Drake, started working this year.

"At 14, they're not really on the schedule," Smith explained. "But when we're shorthanded, we'll have them fill in here and there. They learned everything from the dishwashing all the way up. Luke, now that he graduated high school, is starting to learn office work. He knows every end to both of the restaurants, and now he's starting to learn about the bookkeeping. Drake pretty much knows both of the kitchens real well, and he just loves working in the kitchen."

Although Smith says it would be nice if her boys decided to remain in the restaurant business, she wants her boys to pursue their own goals.

"Our dream was to have a restaurant business," Smith said. "That restaurant grew into a catering company and then another restaurant. We've always said to our boys, 'We decided to go into the restaurant business; we decided to go into the catering business. That's what we wanted for us.' If that's what they want, then they'll play a big part in the restaurants and help run them, but if that's not what they want, then whatever they want to do, I'm behind them 100 percent. They need to go do what will make them happy, because if they're not happy, they're not living. I don't want them to live my dream; I want them to live their dream."

Last spring, Smith says the outside seating area was very popular. When the weather cools down, Smith says they turn off the air and heating in the dining room and open the three sets of doors leading to the outside tables. Smith says the idea came from her memories as a child in San Antonio.

"Back in San Antonio, the ice houses, which are convenience stores, would have big roll-up doors," Smith explained. "When they opened those doors, it was like a free feeling, like everything was open and calm and fresh. When we opened all three sets of doors here, that's what it felt like."

Smith and her husband agree that if given the opportunity to go back and reopen Dip Net, they would do it again. At the moment there are no plans to open a third restaurant, but Smith and her husband are keeping their options open.

"We've got ideas," Smith said. "But every hour of the day is taken. I could easily put together a menu for another place that's totally different from barbeque or catfish."

Dip Net is located at 4858 S. Texas Highway 154, and is open Wednesday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.