



LEFT: In a restored 1887 home, the Wildflower is the place to be on Lookout Mountain.



Benjamin Keener and Laura Catherine Moon

Mentone's Wildflower Cafe

Look at the fall leaves, then head for the food, music, and herbal potions at this local hangout.

BY RICHARD BANKS

Stop by the Wildflower Cafe & Country Store on a perfect October afternoon, and you may find yourself witnessing an impromptu competition: the glow of orange-yellow mountains all around versus the tomato pie and the sideshow that is starting in the kitchen.

The winner may well be the pie, tangy with a crust that surely contains a dollop of love along with the dough. It alone diverts attention from the dazzle out the window. Then chef Benjamin Keener and his assistant start doing something akin to an electric slide on the other side of the order window.

The cackle of laughter from the dining area and the crackle of a grill from the recesses of the kitchen mix with the music of a singer/songwriter playing live in one of the restaurant's dining rooms.

Caught with his groove on, Benjamin chuckles at himself and without missing a beat flips a utensil, smacks it on a table, and hollers through the kitchen window at a nearby group of diners,

"How's y'all's food?" Mouths full, they smile, mumble something in the affirmative, and wave back.

This is Mentone. Spontaneous, alive, and in tune with good times. And the Wildflower Cafe is buzzing. You want to be here if you're not out looking at leaves.

Located atop Lookout Mountain and a short walk from the "brow"—what the locals call the mountain's edge—the Wildflower in its current form is the creation of Benjamin and his wife, Laura Catherine Moon. Benjamin had largely run the cafe since 2005, working for the previous owners, while Moon, as most folks call Laura, owned an herbal remedy, clothing, and gift store nearby. When they married in 2007, they merged business interests, buying the former Wildflower Cafe and relocating it in a rustic residence down the road.



Moon now sells her herbal potions, teas, soaps, and elixirs in the Wildflower's retail section and works with Benjamin on developing health-conscious and earth-friendly recipes and cooking methods.

Using natural, local, and organic ingredients when available, they classify the cuisine as "shabby chic, casual gourmet," explaining that it's creative fare without a lot of fuss.

Menu items range from that tangy tomato pie to freshly ground sirloin burgers and wild-caught salmon. At the Wildflower Cafe, many of the meats, such as the prime rib and filet mignon on the dinner menu and the turkey and ham on the lunch menu, are hormone-free.

"We say our menu ranges from 'careless to conscious,'" Moon explains, "you can eat healthy here as well as indulge a little too." She recommends the peanut butter pie, saying, "It's sooooo good."

Customers echo those sentiments. The Wildflower has become something of an unofficial town center for both locals and tourists looking for a slice of local culture. Jazz, bluegrass, and singer/songwriters play here, and you often find a mountain-music troubadour strolling from table to table. Local nature-based art, much of it for sale, hangs on every wall.

Just beyond those walls, however, scenic gems, such as the gorgeous and gargantuan DeSoto Falls and the 400-foot-deep Little River Canyon, have lured people to this area of Lookout Mountain for generations. "This area is beautiful and still pristine," says Moon. "There are plants and animals found only here. Every



Warm, hearty soup for crisp days

time I look off the brow or into the canyon, I just have to catch my breath because it's so beautiful."

"I didn't grow up that far from Mentone," adds Benjamin, from Ball-play, about an hour south, "but when I first came up here, it was like a different part of the world. You know how people are always talking about how the grass is greener on the other side of the fence?" he asks. "Well, this is that other side of the fence."

He pauses and adds, "I'm having fun, you know, and with that I better get back to 'work,'" signaling air quotes with his fingers as he heads back to the kitchen for more cooking and choreography. *

THE WILDFLOWER CAFE & COUNTRY STORE: 6007 State 117, Mentone, AL 35984; mentonewildflower.com or (256) 634-0066. Open 10 a.m.-2 p.m. daily for brunch and lunch and 5-8 p.m. for dinner Thursday-Saturday; closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and for periods in January and August.

Moon's Hand-Blended Remedies



Lavender Aromatherapy Spray

Sleep even better with a spritz of lavender on your pillow and linens. Detangles hair too. \$10 for 4 ounces

Lavender Moisture and Massage Oil

Tone the skin without clogging a single pore. Regenerate the skin cells after the long summer. \$15 for 4 ounces



Eucalyptus Bath Salts

Clear those fall-allergy sinuses and the occasional ache or twinge from mountain hiking. \$10 for 4 ounces



Soaps and lip balm

Cleanse and tone skin with glycerin soap; also works on your pet's hot spots. Balm moisturizes and protects. \$4 each for soap and balm



Find these products at mentonewildflower.com, or call (256) 634-0066.