



By Becky Billingsley

Thursday, Feb. 2, 2012, Myrtle Beach - Chef Sean Christenson is the most excited he has ever been in his professional life, because he is the executive chef of the new Bandito's Mexican Restaurant being built in the heart of the Myrtle Beach coastline.

"I feel like it's the culmination of my career," said the 39-year-old on Feb. 1. "It's a grand opportunity to introduce people to great things."

As executive chef, menu developer and general manager, Christenson is busy with a myriad of tasks he is eager to tackle. Bandito's, which will be located at 1402 N. Ocean Blvd. in Myrtle Beach, is currently having its exterior walls built off-site, and the plan is to have it ready to open by early May. Developer Chip Smith is planning, with architectural firm Pegram Associates, Inc., a 268-seat restaurant with three bars and an outdoor dining area.

Christenson, whose most recent position was developing the menu for Divine Dining Group's Nacho Hippo restaurant, is busy researching Latin cuisine. He ordered 35 books on the subject to immerse himself in authenticity.

"We'll have fresh local fish - seafood beyond what any other Mexican restaurant in town has. We'll have lots of daily specials that lists the fish's species, and even the boat and captain of the ship."

But while this menu will have a strong Mexican flavor, dishes will also reflect Latin-influenced cuisines from South America, the Caribbean and more.

Chef Christenson says he is up to the challenge of preparing this from-scratch restaurant in three months, and considers the position, "...the greatest opportunity in the state."

Sean Christenson became an executive chef at an early age and gave up the career to learn a new trade.

Some of his earliest culinary memories come from his grandparents' rural South Carolina kitchen. Their homewas rustic, and it was where he and his two brothers, Mark and Andy (four years separated them), and three male cousins of similar ages spent a lot of time.



“They had a potbelly stove in the kitchen, and my grandfather would get up and build a fire,” the chef says. “When the teakettle whistled, grandmother would get up and make breakfast. Then my grandfather would go in the living room and build a fire, and heat up the house. It’s like they were a century behind. How many kids in the late 70s were waiting on a fire for their breakfasts?”

Christenson says he can remember the flavor of his grandmother’s biscuits and cornbread, and how his grandparents raised rabbits, and that fried rabbit was what they always ate for Sunday dinners. His mother, Mary Christenson, learned well how to cook, and the chef calls her culinary abilities “incredible.”

His family didn’t move to the Myrtle Beach area until 1982, the summer before Christenson entered sixth grade. His dad was in the military,

and first they lived on the now-closed U.S. Air Force Base, and then settled into a home in Socastee. During his childhood the family built three homes in Socastee, and while each new home was being constructed they rented oceanfront houses. Sean recalls these periods as idyllic.

Toward the end of his middle school years, Sean got a job at J. Edward's, which was located near the military base's front gate on U.S. 17 Business. It closed in 2011 after the death of its owner, Ed Fleming. The building also housed a Western Sizzlin' chain restaurant.

The young kitchen worker washed dishes and cooked on the line, and one person he worked with was a fellow named Scott Harrelson.

Harrelson left J. Edward's and opened his own racehorse-theme restaurant, called Champions, in 1988. Christenson continued working at J. Edward's until he graduated from Socastee High School in 1989. That year Harrelson had to change the name of his restaurant because a national hotel chain had already copyrighted "Champions" as the name of its hotel bars. So Champions became Thoroughbreds, and in 1990 Christenson accepted a job there. The chef had worked with his brother, Mark Christenson, at J. Edward's/Western Sizzlin', and then Mark Christenson became the executive chef at Thoroughbred's.

Sean Christenson attended Coastal Carolina University until 1991 with an undeclared major, until Harrelson offered to pay for him to enter the culinary arts program at Horry-Georgetown Technical College. He graduated in 1993, but before he graduated his brother, Mark, had moved on to other jobs and Sean was promoted to executive chef at Thoroughbreds. For a decade that was his career, and a highlight in 1999 was being named grand champion of the now-defunct culinary competition called A Taste of the Tideland. About that same time he started teaching culinary classes at his alma mater.

But in 2002, the still-young chef walked out of the kitchen to join his brother, Mark, in his successful floor covering business.

“There was no room left at Thoroughbreds to challenge myself,” he says. “I was bored, and I had been working nights my entire life, never worked a daytime job.”

For two years the brothers worked together.

“It was creative and fun,” Sean says. “We installed marble, tile, stone. We probably did 25 homes in Grand Dunes. We did inlaid mosaics with multiple layers of decorative pieces. It was mathematical,



but fun and neat. We’d take six months just building a shower.”

Mark died in a one-car, one-person accident on Christmas Eve in 2004. He left three children.

Sean continued operating Atlantic Coast Ceramics for another year, but it wasn’t the same without his brother. Next Sean tried owning a used car lot, and that didn’t work out. He wanted to get back in the kitchen, but his family kept talking him out of it, saying how Sean would never get to spend much time with them, especially on holidays.

But finally the culinary urge won out, and the reemerged chef was hired by Divine Dining Group as soon as he inquired about a position. He became executive chef at Divine Fish House, and earned first place from judges at the 2008 American Culinary Federation Souper Supper for his Coconut Creamed Sweet Potato Puree with Spicy Pumpkin Seeds and Toasted Coconut. When Divine Dining Group launched its Nacho Hippo concept at The Market Common in Myrtle Beach, Christenson's innovative menu with creative taco fillings was hailed as a smash hit.

Chef Christenson has always been known as a non-traditional chef; a non-conformist who loves to experiment.

He and his wife Rachel Hendrick Christenson, have a 4-year-old daughter, Sage Elizabeth, and they have a house in Garden City. It's near his parents' home.

The chef left Divine Dining Group on excellent terms, and he says he is grateful to his co-workers there for bringing him back into the culinary world and helping propel his career to the next level. That next level has his mind racing, and he can't wait to show the Grand Strand what he can accomplish.