



Can't stand the heat?

Logan Square Kitchen, a new venue for Chicago's growing food community, poised to open on Milwaukee

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Zina Murray, owner of Logan Square Kitchen, stands where one of the prep tables will be installed. Murray hopes her business will add to the city's thriving food community. -Jennifer Wolfe/Contributor

Part kitchen, part dining hall, part education center, the building at 2333 N. Milwaukee Ave. will soon serve all of these purposes, among many others, if all goes according to plan for food advocate and entrepreneur Zina Murray. And although she has the bottom line constantly in mind, the scope of her project, she hopes, will extend to the Chicago food community as a whole, while also becoming a business incubator in Logan Square. Her business, she says, is admittedly partial to locally and organically-produced foods.

Located just west of California Ave., Murray acquired the property at a foreclosure auction in August of last year. She says she had to talk a drunk off the roof on the day she closed.

The project is one of two ambitious ones for the block. Two doors down, another Logan Square resident, Josh Deth, owner of the Handlebar restaurant,

plans to open a brew pub. With their initiative, an otherwise sparse commercial corridor may soon become a Logan Square hotspot.

Murray's project would turn the three-story building in to a mixed-use space with two two-bedroom units on the second and third floors-potential live-work spaces-along with a dining area and a modified kitchen on the LEED-certified first floor, with its approximately 6,000 square feet of space. She hopes to use the dining area for community functions and educational sessions, and the kitchen will be leased to up-start prepared food companies and chefs who could not otherwise afford a space of their own.

Murray says she has a variety of businesses in the community interested in her space, from a pastry chef to an organic baby food company. She hopes that her tenants and the community can learn from one another about the local food business.

“It’s a wonderful place for a lot of education to take place,” she says.



Zina Murray shows plans of the layout of her test kitchen. She is standing in the physical space at 2333 N. Milwaukee.

Perhaps the most striking element of her project lies in its creativity—the way it defies conventional food service models. It is an idea hothouse and a gathering place. If it is in the mold of anything, it is that of the innovative and community-minded ethos of Logan Square, a business community with a social mission. One could almost call it the Silicon Valley of Chicago neighborhoods.

Murray wants the business to be an economic engine for the community. She says she would be willing to allow non-profit neighborhood organizations to host one event in the dining area free of charge to give it a test drive.

“I want to reach out and make sure that they’ll be able to use the space and expand their businesses,” she says.

The dining area, in the front portion of the building, will be laid out to accommodate a variety of uses—markets, weddings, banquets and community meetings—according to the architect of record, Jean Dufresne, principal of SPACE Architects & Planners.

The kitchen will be designed so that tasks can be compartmentalized yet shared.

“It’s laid out in a way that a variety of people working for different companies could be working there at the same time,” says Dufresne.

“It has a collective, commune sort of feel,” he adds, in keeping with Murray’s wishes.

The bulk of the space’s green components will be in the kitchen.

Food service facilities are particularly challenging in this respect, says Sachin Anand, principal of dbHMS a design-build engineering firm. Anand is working as the green engineer on the project. Murray and Anand first met when they worked together to propose an indoor market to the city on the site of the Mega Mart on Milwaukee Ave.

“Food service facilities are typically energy hogs,” says Anand. “The real energy use is in the equipment.”

Anand says that it is rare for food service facilities to attempt LEED certification, and that he has only

one other food service project in the city with the same ambitions.

Among the kitchen's unique features, its exhaust hubs will monitor the amount of conditioned air released from the space so that the HVAC system can replace it. And because the kitchen space is only a one-story structure in the rear of the building, they will be able to install skylights in the kitchen.

"I don't know of a food service environment with natural light," says Anand.

They also hope to install solar panels on the roof to help heat the water.

Prior to hiring her design team, Murray says she researched extensively and agonized over the decision. "It was pretty much three months of sleepless nights, but completely worth it," she says.

Murray's passion for healthy, sustainable foods came when she was in mid-career in the corporate world. Her body suffered a letdown under the grind of a corporate job, a poor diet and little exercise. She was diagnosed with a laundry list of problems, not the least of which was Graves' disease, a condition in which the immune system attacks the thyroid gland.

"It all cascaded, everything fell like dominoes," she says. "Everything was related, and all my systems fell apart."

After being treated through traditional, modern methods, without much success, she began to find out about other diseases she would probably develop in the future from the medications she was taking. She also began learning about non-traditional methods of treatment, especially nutrition.

"At that point, I basically said, 'enough,' and fired everyone," she says.

She then left her job, quit smoking, joined a gym and started eating healthy.

"I now feel 10 years younger than I did 10 years ago," she says, and all because she learned to eat well and to listen to her body.

Her mission now is to help other people become healthy, and her new business is the tool. "I couldn't not do something," she says. The emotion in her face is unmistakable.

And she has found welcoming company in Chicago's food community, a group of people overwhelmingly dedicated to improving quality and access to local food. From urban gardens to organic bakeries and farmers' markets starting up everywhere, a real sense of purpose has been emerging within the city, to improve the way it eats and its overall quality of life.

"The talent, dedication and energy in this town's food community are phenomenal," says Murray. "Most people walking up and down the street probably have no idea...but they will soon."