



Visitors to The Yard can enjoy a variety of dining menu options from BA Eats, Larry's Pizza, Saigon Craft Goods and Slader's Alaskan Dumplings. A full-service bar, live entertainment and games are also part of the new venue, located just steps from the A-State campus.

THE YARD – A WORLD OF FLAVORS UNDER ONE ROOF

New Food Hall and Cultural Hub Opens Near A-State

BY AUDREY HANES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA DONNER

Dr. Dan and Casey Johnson, two local entrepreneurs with a flair for trying exciting new things, recently brought a unique concept to Jonesboro with The Yard. The new food hall, located on the outskirts of Arkansas State University's campus, brings four restaurants, a large bar, games, live music and more all under one roof.

The Johnsons are well-established business owners in their beloved hometown. A Nettleton High School graduate, Dan attended Wheaton College and Oklahoma State University before completing his residency and fellowship at Tulane and the VA Hospital in New Orleans. He moved back to Jonesboro to open his neuropsychology practice, and he is also the director of Medical Rehab Group. Dan is the owner of Brickhouse Grill and a co-owner of BA Eats, both of which are local establishments that offer food and more.

Casey also graduated from Nettleton High School before attending the University of Arkansas and Arkansas State University. She is the property manager for the couple's real estate investments

and operates their local and international Airbnbs. Casey has volunteered for many local nonprofits and currently serves as president of the Downtown Entertainment District Oversight Committee. The Johnsons have been married 15 years and have two children, 10-year-old Krewe and 6-year-old Isla.

Several years ago, Dan and Casey decided to combine their love for A-State with their decades-long experience with food, entertainment and promotion into a new concept for Jonesboro – a family-friendly food hall.

"The concept was definitely a collaborative approach between Casey and me," said Dan. "I knew I wanted to do a completely different concept than Brickhouse. I absolutely love Brickhouse and could not be more proud of what it has accomplished and grown into over the past 18 years; however, Jonesboro is too small of a market to support two identical/similar concepts, so I knew I wanted to do something that was a 180 from Brickhouse. The concept of the food hall was established early, but how the bar part would be factor in and what the theme, feel, look and sound of the space would be very much to be determined."

AMSTERDAM INSPIRATION

Dan, who is Dutch, had spent time in Amsterdam over the years but never more than a few days at a time. That all changed when the family decided to spend several weeks there in the summer of 2024 and immersed themselves in the culture in an effort to live like locals. Dan says they stumbled across Holland Food Hall and everything clicked.

"Holland Food Hall is The Yard on steroids," said Dan. "It has great local food options represented by numerous unique eateries coupled with a bar centrally located in the middle and lots of entertainment, and it catered to such a diverse customer base – you had families, professionals, students, old, young and everywhere in between. The price points were approachable, and the food choices made eating exciting again. You never know what you'd feel like eating and could go to the same place for a week straight and never have the same kind of food."

"We must have spent about half our stay at the Holland Food Hall, making observations and tons of notes. We asked ourselves what would translate to Jonesboro, Arkansas, and what would not. Arkansas is the Natural State for a reason, and Amsterdam is one of the most densely populated major cities in Europe. What we have in Jonesboro is outside natural space, so we mutually decided to integrate the food/bar/entertainment aspect of the Holland Food Hall with being outside. The Yard boasts four huge garage doors, and we go 'open air' every time we can, thus The Yard."

The food hall concept is one that the Johnsons were already familiar with from their travels.

"Whether it's the Faneuil Hall in Boston, Central Market Hall in Budapest, the Mercado San Miguel in Madrid or the Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia, we've always loved the idea of food halls," said Casey. "They all inspired us to bring something similar to Jonesboro."

THE MAKING OF THE YARD

The Yard is home to four restaurants – BA Eats, Larry's Pizza, Saigon Craft Foods and Slader's Alaskan Dumplings – and opening all of them under one roof, along with everything else available at The Yard, was no small feat.

"The plans were developed and finalized before COVID," said Casey. "Construction took longer than expected, then we had four different new businesses that were trying to open under one roof. The private club permit was a much longer and painfully tedious process than we imagined, but once we received our permit, the ball started rolling really quickly. If it were easy, it wouldn't be worth doing."

While the two have plenty of business and restaurant experience between them, The Yard proved to be one of their most complicated ventures yet.

"Starting a business from the ground up is daunting, and bringing a completely different concept to the market is enormously challenging," said Dan. "The building neared completion except for the bar portion as COVID was bearing down on us, and that really threw a wrench into so many aspects of the building and the businesses inside the building."

"The food portion opened, but it sort-of limped along for the better part of two or three years while the very challenging part of applying for and receiving a liquor license was under way. It wasn't





until June of 2024 that we really dove into transforming the space, the bar and the concept into what it was meant to be.”

The location of the new food hall was one of the Johnsons’ main concerns, and as Red Wolf fans who wanted to remain close to their hub of Downtown Jonesboro, they wanted to figure out a way to marry the two locations and customer bases.

“We are downtowners, but ASU campus is less than a mile away from downtown,” said Casey. “We wanted to try to bridge that gap between A-State students and downtown. The university has been so supportive of us, and the students are really enjoying the variety we offer, as well as the laidback atmosphere.”

“A-State has struggled with what I call a ‘student life perception,’” added Dan. “That perception is that there is nothing to do in Jonesboro or around campus. I use the word perception because it’s absolutely not true. There are all kinds of things to do in and around Jonesboro and A-State. The Yard being in such close proximity to A-State was purposeful and necessary to the concept. We want the A-State students to feel incorporated into the community. We want to dramatically increase the interaction between the greater Jonesboro community and A-State students, faculty, sports, events and culture.”

The Johnsons each put their own area of expertise to good use, with Dan leading the way on the service industry and business side of things such as staffing, the entertainment schedule, finances and business model, while Casey has focused on marketing, promotion and the new business’ social media presence.

“I love to stay busy, but I tend to over-extend myself and there’s never enough time to get all that I want or need to get done on any given day,” said Dan. “Our two children are in school now, which frees Casey up from morning to early afternoon to assist with boots-on-the-ground tasks at The Yard. Her presence, ideas,

personal connections and positive attitude have been invaluable to me and to the business.”

WHAT THE YARD BRINGS TO THE TABLE

BA Eats’ second Jonesboro location worked well with the concept, and the Johnsons chose the other three restaurants carefully. Dan says they wanted four unique, locally owned and operated food eateries that were all distinctly different from each other.

“We wanted to have locally owned/operated restaurants and knew we wanted a variety of cuisine,” said Dan. “They were chosen for their diversity of food offerings, quality of menu and broad appeal to a wide customer base. They work together extremely well. When we host an event, all the eateries get business and enjoy the increased foot traffic. Because of our set-up under one roof, we are literally and metaphorically all in this together.

“You want the best burger in town or the most delicious, blackened shrimp tacos made to your liking? BA is in there. You want customized pizza, chicken wings, cheese sticks or a deli sandwich? Larry’s Pizza has got you covered. You crave authentic, and I mean authentic, Vietnamese cuisine? Saigon is amazing. Or maybe you’re feeling like a little comfort food and a unique take on dumplings. Sladers is a phenomenal eatery and a breath of fresh air on the Jonesboro food scene. The Yard offers all of this and the opportunity to enjoy your meal, happy hour, celebration or just hanging out with friends with a tasty libation with or without alcohol.”

Casey describes the two-story, AstroTurf-floored establishment as a foodie heaven where she enjoys eating something different every day.

“I can never go wrong with a BA burger,” she said. “My daughter always wants Larry’s Pizza, and my son always eats

Slader’s Alaskan Dumplings. Dan craves the pork vermicelli from Saigon. As far as drinks go, I love espresso during the day and a blood orange martini or draft beer in the evenings.”

In addition to the four restaurants, The Yard features a full-service bar, live entertainment several times a week, 10 large flat screens for sports viewing, four garage doors to let the outside in, two pool tables, Golden Tee Golf, a ping pong table, BAGGO, giant Jenga, giant Connect Four, a phone booth from New Orleans full of board game and activities for all ages, plenty of seating both indoors and out, and free Wi-Fi.

“We have a lot of space,” said Dan. “We can seat approximately 125 people, so the possibilities are endless, really. We love collaborating with other businesses and organizations and can host birthdays, office parties, gender reveals, graduation parties, sorority and fraternity date nights, family get-togethers, alumni events, karaoke, trivia nights, Mahjong, pool and ping pong tournaments, high school and college sports banquets, academic department meetings, reunions and run clubs – literally celebrations of any kind.”

Music plays a vital role in the feel and atmosphere of The Yard, as well. Casey says the music scene in Jonesboro is exciting right now, and they like to support local artists, who, in turn, support them.

“Live music has always been part of our vibe, and it creates an enjoyable atmosphere,” said Casey. “Music is a common denominator which brings people together. We are so blessed to have so much musical talent in Northeast Arkansas, so we love to show off that talent at The Yard – anything from solos and duos to full on five-member bands with back-up singers – we have it all, and our customers love it.”

Dan says phase two of The Yard includes plans to fence in the large yard outside to allow for more outdoor seating, fire pits, outdoor music and outdoor games.

LOCAL SUPPORT

As The Yard establishes itself on the Jonesboro restaurant and entertainment scene, the Johnsons are working to appeal to a wide variety of customers. Dan says the concept has quickly taken root in Jonesboro, with an overwhelmingly positive response from patrons.

“How many times do you hear people who travel throughout Arkansas, throughout the country and internationally, and they go on and on about this place or that place that would be so cool to have in Jonesboro?” asked Dan. “The answer is, ‘A lot.’ Jonesboro is the fifth largest city in Arkansas; we should have places like The Yard. We can have cool, enviable hot spots like The Yard, and thanks to the overwhelming support we’ve received since opening, there certainly is a need for a place like The Yard that appeals to a broad swath of customers.”

The Yard is family friendly, something Casey said was an important aspect of their new business.

“As a mother of two young children, I knew I wanted to create a space that could be enjoyed by all ages,” said Casey. “As a family, it’s hard to agree on what’s for dinner. This food hall concept is great for groups of friends, as well; everybody can try something different and share. . . .

“I have really enjoyed connecting with various members of the community and meeting everyone who walks in the door. When others are having a great time, I’m enjoying that the most. It is truly a labor of love. Our family spends a lot of time at The Yard, so we’re creating a place that we can enjoy while working.”



Dan feels similarly about the personal investment in The Yard and what it has brought to their hometown.

“The restaurant and bar business are predominantly a labor of love,” said Dan. “No one is getting rich owning and running a locally owned and operated eatery/bar. To be successful, there needs to be a higher motivation – an intrinsic motivation that is rewarding well beyond any financial gains. I love that before Brickhouse was on Main Street, it was a boarded-up pawn shop. I love that before BA was on Southwest Drive, it was a closed down dry cleaner. I take pride that before The Yard, it was pretty much a derelict piece of property with zero going on.

“I thoroughly enjoy creating and building businesses that are taken from concepts in my head to realities in my hand. I think there’s something to be said about challenging and changing the environment one finds themselves in and leaving a lasting legacy of creative hard work.”

Arkansas State’s support of the establishment has been vital, as well. The Yard has become a game day favorite and is frequented throughout the week by students.

“The Yard is absolutely for everyone in the community,” said Casey. “We’ve kind of become the Red Wolves Country Club because on game days (home and away), we’re filled with fans from babies to adults cheering on the Red Wolves. We try to offer a variety of events and entertainment to appeal to everyone. . . .

“I’m amazed by the support of Arkansas State University and our community. Even our downtowner family has embraced us as another spot to stop in. We hosted a benefit night for the NEA Food Bank, which really brought together the students and the community for a great cause.”

The Yard, located at 1918 Aggie Road, is open from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. seven days a week. For more information, find The Yard on Facebook or call (870) 206-7467.