

Where Everybody Knows Your Name: Jacx & Eric Ramos, Michael Jeo, and Center Street Grill

Center Street Grill will celebrate its fifteenth birthday on November 1 this year, making it the same age as Jacx Ramos' daughter. "We opened on November 1, 2005 because my mother-in-law was at that point alive and did not like the idea of opening on Halloween," says Jacx (short for Jacqueline), speaking of the tiny-but-mighty Lolinda Ramos. "This happened and this started just because they [Lolinda and her son, Eric] enjoyed good things and they wanted to take care of people in the right way."

When Jacx, her husband Eric, and their friend and co-owner Michael Jeo moved down from Washington, D.C., New Town was just taking its first hesitant steps forward. "Eric and I both lost our fathers," says Jacx. "We wanted a place where we could start a family." Their friend Anne Carroll Bull asked them to come down and help her run A. Carroll's Bistro, "and that's when we said, 'Well, we're not going to Roanoke [her hometown] and we're not going to Hawaii [Eric's home state], so let's try this!'" Eric eventually bought space in the third structure ever built in New Town, and Center Street Grill's familiar yellow sign has hung there ever since.

Jacx's response to the question "What do you love most about the restaurant?" is immediate and wistful: the people. "We've worked in two restaurants in Williamsburg since we moved here, and a lot of our regulars came here from A. Carroll's," she says. And though she still has native Williamsburg customers who say it's their first time in, Center Street Grill is characterized by its regulars and its personal touch (and the excellent food, of course). "We don't work nine to five, we live with these people," says Jacx. "If they're having babies, you're at the hospital; if they're losing relatives, you're at the funerals." And that affectionate commitment goes both ways—Jacx has been getting texts from her laid-off staff asking when they can come back, and some "stupid and ridiculous" friends getting takeout have left \$50 tips on a \$200 check. "In 2009, when the recession hit, our bar kept us alive...because [customers] needed that human contact," says Jacx. Now, with human contact entirely unsafe, the friends and regulars of Center Street Grill have stepped up to repay the hospitality.

This is not to say Center Street Grill—or any New Town business—is out of the woods. Jacx, Eric, and Michael have been running takeout with the help of the Ramos' seventeen-year-old son, who became their pantry chef and started the delivery service for the restaurant when robbed of his final semester at Lafayette. However, Jacx is ultimately optimistic. "It's just been the four of us, because there's no money to pay anybody," she says. "And it's been great, it's been like a family stepping up and getting together and doing what needs to be done."

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