

Two Chefs Moved to Rural Minnesota to Expand on Their Mission of Racial Justice

Mateo Mackbee and Erin Lucas left Minneapolis for a small central Minnesota community, where they are using their restaurant, bakery and farm to promote diversity and teach children about food.

By Brett Anderson

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ST. JOSEPH, Minn. — Krewe, a restaurant in this small central-Minnesota city, is a tribute to Mary Mackbee, a former high school principal who raised four children in a Twin Cities suburb on the cooking of her native New Orleans.

“More than anything, gumbo is the smell I remember,” said Mateo Mackbee, one of those children and the chef and co-owner of Krewe. “That’s one you would get outside the front door.”

Mr. Mackbee was in the dining room of Krewe, a window-lined restaurant in a new low-rise building in downtown St. Joseph, a community of 7,000 about 70 miles northwest of Minneapolis. His mother was there, too, sharing stories about her life and overseeing the jambalaya that Mr. Mackbee’s 21-year-old son, Makel, was cooking for takeout service later that day.

Krewe’s sign reads “est. 1944,” Ms. Mackbee’s birth year, even though it opened in late May, four days after George Floyd was killed while in the custody of the Minneapolis police.

Mr. Mackbee, 47, and Erin Lucas, 27, his girlfriend and business partner, moved to central Minnesota from Minneapolis two years ago. They were driven by a shared desire to bring awareness of racial inequities to rural communities, and to find an alternative to the limited career options available to them in Minneapolis and St. Paul.



Mr. Mackbee at Krewe, his New Orleans-style restaurant in St. Joseph. Andrea Ellen Reed for The New York Times

“I had grown kind of weary of the restaurant scene in the Twin Cities, where it was hard for someone like myself,” Mr. Mackbee said. “I’m a little bit older and a little bit darker than most of the people on the line.”

The partners began with a successful pop-up restaurant in New London, a small city in a neighboring county. They sank deeper roots this spring, when they also opened Flour & Flower, a bakery in a cottage-style building behind Krewe. Ms. Lucas is the bakery’s chef.

On a sunny morning in mid-June, the line of customers waiting to buy her croissants, baguettes and pastries ran outside the bakery nearly to Krewe’s back door. Both businesses are a short bicycle ride from the Lake Wobegon Trail.



Ms. Lucas is the chef at Flour & Flower, a bakery located in the alley behind Krewe. Andrea Ellen Reed for The New York Times

St. Joseph, though home to the small liberal-arts College of Saint Benedict, is not a cradle of racial diversity. It’s more than 90 percent white. Locals whose families have lived here for generations say Krewe is the city’s first brick-and-mortar business owned by an African-American. And the community is in a part of Minnesota known for its divisive politics around immigration and race.

But St. Joseph offered Mr. Mackbee an opportunity for ownership that he hadn’t received in the cities, despite his culinary degree and nearly a decade of experience in some of the area’s most respected restaurants. He proudly points out that three members of Krewe’s four-person kitchen staff are people of color.

“We’ve flipped the scenario that I’m normally used to,” he said.

Jon C. Petters, who owns the properties where Krewe and Flour & Flower are located, sold the couple hard on the potential of opening their businesses in St. Joseph. Mr. Mackbee and Ms. Lucas were first wooed to central Minnesota by Mark Kopka, whom Mr. Mackbee met in 2015 in a bar in a Twin Cities suburb. Mr. Kopka is the pastor of Nordland Lutheran Church in Paynesville, which, like St. Joseph, is in Stearns County.



Mark Kopka is the pastor of Nordland Lutheran Church in Paynesville. He recruited Mr. Mackbee and Ms. Lucas to central Minnesota after meeting Mr. Mackbee in a bar. Andrea Ellen Reed for The New York Times

The men bonded over Mr. Mackbee's dream of starting a farm where he could bring students of color who didn't otherwise have access to nature — a goal the couple plan to realize in September through Model Citizen, the nonprofit group they created.

"We talked about this larger vision to get kids connected to the land and to food," Mr. Kopka recalled. "I said, 'Dude, come check out Paynesville.'"

Mr. Kopka introduced Mr. Mackbee and Ms. Lucas to locals who were hungry for an alternative to the chain restaurants that proliferate in this region of farmland, rolling prairie and lakes. But the chefs were welcomed for reasons that went beyond their culinary talent.

"A lot of people who grew up here, they've never known a person of color," said Steve Peterson, 62, a retired General Mills executive from Paynesville who attends Mr. Kopka's church. "There's something about these guys being here that helps."

Stearns County, while still about 85 percent white, is home to some of the largest immigrant communities in Minnesota. Agriculture and food-processing jobs in central Minnesota towns like Willmar (home to Jennie-O Turkey, in neighboring Kandiyohi County), and St. Cloud, the Stearns County seat, have drawn workers, particularly from East Africa and Latin America, for three decades.

The demographic changes have touched off a rise in nativist politics and xenophobia in Stearns and bordering counties. In 2017, a St. Cloud City Council member proposed a moratorium on new immigrants. The motion failed, but it attested to the open white resentment over immigration. The same year, a Willmar man was arrested after placing a pig's foot on the table of a farmers' market booth operated by young Somali Muslims.



Mr. Mackbee in the kitchen at Krewe. The chef ate New Orleans food growing up in the suburbs outside the Twin Cities. Andrea Ellen Reed for The New York Times

Growing up in Stearns County, Emma Ditlevson, a 21-year-old Krewe line cook, overheard friends' parents as they criticized immigrants for failing to assimilate.

"I don't think people here realize that it's a beautiful thing to represent a different culture in a community that doesn't have that much diversity," said Ms. Ditlevson, who was born in South Korea and adopted by a white couple. "Instead of seeing the culture as something beautiful and something to embrace and something to understand more, they see it as something people should just give up."

Mr. Mackbee said St. Joseph doesn't feel far removed from the unrest and anger unleashed by Mr. Floyd's killing. The St. Cloud police used tear gas to disperse a crowd of protesters three weeks after Mr. Floyd's death.

He and Ms. Lucas were drawn to the region in part for the opportunity to confront issues of racial injustice with Model Citizen, just on prairie land instead of pavement — an impulse that is as much a tribute to his mother's influence as Krewe's menu.

"We're probably worse here, as far as racial tension," Mr. Mackbee said. "I feel like my mom prepared me for coming out here and facing whatever comes my way."

Mr. Mackbee is soft-spoken, though blunt. Two years ago, he ran for City Council in New London. "I came in third," he said.

Small-town life is not new to him. He attended college in rural Wisconsin on a soccer scholarship. While there, he recalled, he was asked to speak to a white student who had hung a noose over a Black student's dorm-room door.

"They wanted me to be the one to tell this guy this was a bad thing," he said. "I've been a token my entire life."

Krewe's opening would be notable even if it were in New Orleans, a majority-Black city where restaurants owned by African-Americans are still relatively rare. Equally unusual are restaurant chefs of Mr. Mackbee's training who learned to cook New Orleans cuisine at home — through recipes that descend directly from African-American home cooks of the Jim Crow era.

Mr. Mackbee has never worked in a New Orleans-style restaurant. And the food Ms. Mackbee cooked for her children in the 1980s and '90s was virtually untouched by the vagaries of contemporary restaurant trends. The first time she ate at a white-owned restaurant, she said, was on a visit to Commander's Palace, in New Orleans, in the mid-60s. She moved to the Twin Cities a few years later.

"I never had a steak until I came up here," she said. "I always thought steak was cooked with gravy."

Mr. Mackbee talks about his mother's 51-year career as an educator as much as he does about her cooking. Ms. Mackbee served 26 years as principal of Central High School, the state's oldest high school and the largest in its capital, St. Paul.



Mary Mackbee, Mr. Mackbee's mother, at Central High School in St. Paul, where she served as principal for 26 years. Jerry Holt/Star Tribune, via Getty Images

She retired in 2019, two years after one of her former students, Melvin Carter III, was elected St. Paul's first African-American mayor. Ms. Mackbee spoke at his inauguration, which was held at Central High.

"She was one of those principals who never sat in her office," Mr. Mackbee said. "She's broken her wrist and all that kind of stuff, breaking up fights at school."

Ms. Mackbee, 76, leaned into adversity while growing up in segregated New Orleans. Her civil-rights activism occasionally drew her away from Louisiana as a young adult.

She recalled knocking on the door of a Roman Catholic bishop in Mobile, Ala., in 1965. She was there to voice her displeasure with the bishop's removal of a priest who had provided shelter for her and other Black activists when they traveled to Selma to protest that summer.

Ms. Mackbee ended up taking her grievance to a higher authority. "We wrote a letter to the pope," she said. "Never heard from him."



Ms. Mackbee inside Krewe, which is a tribute to her. Andrea Ellen Reed for The New York Times

She married Earsell Mackbee, a cornerback for the Minnesota Vikings, after moving to St. Paul in the late '60s to become the only Black teacher at a nearly all-white public school. After the couple divorced, Ms. Mackbee raised their four children alone in suburban Bloomington.

She cooked her family large pots of the dishes she had grown up eating in New Orleans, except that she used sausage where her mother, struggling to make ends meet, used hot dogs.

“That was the economical way,” Ms. Mackbee said. “But I had a job, so I could afford some real sausage.”

Mr. Mackbee cooked dinner for a group of friends at Krewe in mid-June, when the restaurant was open only for takeout. (It will begin dine-in service on Thursday.)

The gumbo, inspired by Ms. Mackbee's, is reminiscent of a style found in older, Creole restaurants in New Orleans: The broth is thin, stained by a light brown roux and loaded with shrimp and sausage.



The gumbo at Krewe is reminiscent of a style found in older, Black-owned restaurants in New Orleans. Andrea Ellen Reed for The New York Times

A Midwestern twist came from the andouille sausage made by Johnsonville, a Wisconsin company famous for its bratwurst, and shrimp raised in aboveground pools by Paul Damhof on a former cattle farm outside Willmar. (“Our Willmar water is some of the best water for raising shrimp,” Mr. Damhof said.)

Similar ingredients enriched a spicy jambalaya Mr. Mackbee also learned from his mother. Instead of mixing the ingredients together as in a paella, the traditional method in southern Louisiana, the Mackbees’ jambalaya is a savory sauce spooned over plain rice. “The way I make it, you don’t have to fish out the shrimp,” Ms. Mackbee said of the idiosyncratic technique.



Jambalaya at Krewe. Andrea Ellen Reed for The New York Times

Matt Lindstrom, a friend of the chefs, sampled these dishes, along with red beans, barbecue shrimp and bread pudding, as New Orleans music played in Krewe’s dining room. Mr. Lindstrom, 50, is a political-science professor at Saint John’s University, a small liberal-arts college for men just outside St. Joseph that is closely affiliated with the all-woman College of Saint Benedict.

He struggled to explain his excitement over finding a place like Krewe in St. Joseph.

“When I was a kid, it was a big deal to go to Applebee’s,” said Mr. Lindstrom, who grew up in Willmar. “And you had to drive to St. Cloud for that.”

In September, Mr. Mackbee and Ms. Lucas hope to bring the first group of local students to the one-acre farm they are building with Mr. Kopka and other collaborators in Paynesville. It’s based on a project the chefs tried out in New London.

“One of the things we noticed is that all of these kids are literally surrounded by farmland,” Mr. Mackbee said, “but they literally don’t have the opportunity to step onto it.”

Ms. Lucas remembers how thrilled some young Somali students were by the sight of rhubarb, assuming it was tamarind. “They were like, ‘We haven’t seen this since we were home,’” Ms. Lucas said.



The farm is on the land in Paynesville, not far from Mr. Kopka’s church. Andrea Ellen Reed for The New York Times

The new farm is near the north fork of the Crow River, on land donated to Model Citizen by the retired executive Mr. Peterson and his wife, Mary, through a partnership with Nordland church. Mr. Peterson spent his later years at General Mills trying to educate farmers on the virtues of regenerative agriculture, a sustainable farming practice that aims to improve the soil.

“We see this farm as a model for the area,” said Mr. Peterson, “to encourage other young people to be entrepreneurs, and to do what’s right for the land.”

By year’s end, Mr. Mackbee and Ms. Lucas plan to have a chicken coop, sheep and a wood-fired oven to cook for outdoor parties on the property. The ingredients will show up on their menus. And, ideally, the farm will enrich the community in other ways.

Standing outdoors on a windy afternoon last month, Mr. Mackbee looked toward a patch of forest at the edge of the still-unplowed farmland. “I need to get the kids out here to see it and to smell it,” he said.

His thoughts drifted toward a future when he can host children of color from the Twin Cities, like those his mother taught for so many years.

“If we can just get them out here for a while, away from the stress,” he said, “maybe we can help give them what they need, to be what they want to be, and not what society says they are.”

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