

Artisanal market set for soft opening in Dover today

By Mike Finney

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DOVER — Time hasn't seemed very consistent recently for Justin and Tara Brant while working with downtown Dover officials over the past year in opening an artisans' market.

However, today is finally the day when the Black Swamp Artisanal Market will swing its doors wide for a soft opening from 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. in part of the Bayard building at 204 W. Lookerman St. in downtown Dover.

"Time seemed to have dragged on for a while when we were getting started with the market, but as time has gone on, it seems like everything has sped up around tenfold," said Mr. Brant, who, along with his wife, will be the lead tenant at the market.

"We still have some work to do. We will have to work out the kinks over the next month and learn as we go."

The Brants will offer food and products from their Black Swamp Farmstead in Felton and will be joined by around 25 other local artisans who will also offer their products at the location.

The Brants have participated in the Capital City Farmers Market in downtown Dover for the past two years, offering pastured pork and chicken, coffee, soaps, lotions, candles and accessories.

About a year and a half ago, Diane Laird, the executive director of the Downtown Dover Partnership, envisioned a way to fill vacant space and meet a need for the Dover community at the same time.

Hence, the idea for the artisanal market was sprung.

"We are thrilled to see the opening of Black Swamp Artisanal Market, an idea that our 'Unlock the Block' team conceptualized well over a year ago and then were thrilled to meet Justin and Tara Brant to make it happen," Ms. Laird said. "We knew that artisan markets are a nationwide trend these days, and rightfully so, as they feature one-of-a-kind and hand-crafted edibles and items, all from local artisans.

"With products of over 20 vendors available (in Dover), patrons will enjoy fresh, local honey, meats, eggs, popcorn, cut flowers, crabs, ice cream, lettuce and herbs, wood-crafted items, and a wide va-



Submitted photo

The Black Swamp Artisanal Market is set for a soft opening today at 204 W. Lookerman St. in downtown Dover.

riety of other products."

Ms. Laird is confident the market will be a success.

"In fact, we believe that, in time, some of these artisans may even outgrow the space and birth another similar store in downtown, while growing the local economy and providing very healthy food and local craft options," she said.

Mr. Brant said the plan is to be open Thursday through Sunday from around 8 a.m. until 5 p.m.

The other artisans who are joining the Brants' Black Swamp Farmstead in Dover's new artisanal market include: 302Aquaponics, Big Joe's Honey, Bites of Delight, Bodine Farms and Meat Market, Chesapeake Gold Farms, Closet 410 Oils, Delmarva Popcorn, Derby Mill Farm, Dittmar Family Farms, Dulin Produce, Epicurean Provisions and Fascination Street.

Products will also be offered by Fat Cat Farms, Fortitude Furnishings, Hometown Rustics, Kerr Acres, Old Dog WoodCraft, Mick's Grass Fed Beef, Nash's Veggies, Ross Crabs, Heidi Davis, Tatanka Sauce, The Bold Co Girl, The Wood Tick and Tre Sorelle Dolce hand-dipped ice cream and Italian ice.

Ms. Laird said the idea for the marketplace sprouted from the Unlock the Block initiative, a group including the Downtown Dover Partnership, the National Coun-

cil on Agricultural Life & Labor Research's Restoring Central Dover project and other community organizations that are striving to breathe new life and bring new businesses to the Lookerman Street area.

Not only do artisan marketplaces provide a more intimate and specialized shopping experience, Ms. Laird said, but they also function as informal social gatherings where shoppers can meet local craftsmen, artists and designers from their community.

"It will not only operate as one store, but it will look like one store, so there won't be any unique stalls for various subtenants or consignors," she said. "It is not going to look like a space with various stalls, and there's not going to be tape on the floor to mark one tenant from another. It's going to have a unified look, but with multiple partners in the venture.

"This is meant to be more of an upscale artisans' market, and there are some examples in various parts of the country, but basically, it's a sophisticated look, and they're beautiful, really."

It is hoped the market will not only serve as a place for artisans to sell local products, but to also interact with community members.

"They can provide training, workshop demos and that kind of

thing and invite the community to attend, and it becomes kind of a gathering place for locals or those from the region that want to learn more about the products that are sold in there," Ms. Laird said.

For Mr. Brant, it's finally time.

"We're obviously super-pumped about it," he said. "It's a great opportunity for us to be able to participate in something like (this), and it's a great opportunity for us to be involved with the community. The community supports us, and in a big circle, we support the community, so I think it's important and a win-win for everybody."

Ms. Laird has her fingers crossed that the success of the market will play a part in reinvigorating West Lookerman.

"The demographic, the customer base, of those that have expressed interest in this project have a lot in common," she said. "It stands to be kind of a destination business, where people would come from around the region 20 or 30 miles away or when they're traveling from Lewes to Wilmington or going up and down the state.

"It could be a really nice stop-off to get some upscale goods and items. That's certainly what we're hoping for."

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