

# 'Sweet' cafe has letter of intent for Universal Life building

Feb 16, 2017, 6:00am CST

A former **Next Food Network Star** finalist is bringing her cuisine Downtown.

Aryen Moore-Alston, owner and executive chef of Sweet Potato Baby, is planning to open a Downtown cafe as part of the \$6.2 million renovation of the historic Universal Life Insurance Co. building.

"We filled out a letter of intent to lease the space," Moore-Alston said. "We're waiting on final kitchen design to make sure everything we want can be accommodated in that space."

***To see rendering of the cafe and other photos, check out the slideshow.***

Sweet Potato Baby, a catering and baked goods company, is looking to lease about 1,849 square feet in the building's basement, with seating for about 70 to 90 people.

Moore-Alston is hoping to open the Downtown location of Sweet Potato Baby Cafe in January or February of 2018, after a nine-month renovation of the historic building, which is expected to begin in March.

Sweet Potato Baby opened a location in the United Way of the Mid-South building on Tillman last October. Moore-Alston said she is still considering if the cafe will be a relocation or a second location.



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"The United Way doesn't have anyone to run their cafe space," Moore-Alston said. "In the beginning, I thought, we'll just move the whole operation Downtown, but [two locations] could work. If finances work out, it would be an amazing opportunity."

Initially, Moore-Alston was drawn to the history of the Universal Life building, which housed one of the largest African-American-owned life insurance companies in the U.S. and became an important place for commerce, civic and social gathering in the 1960s.

A restaurant will create the kind of vibrancy Jimmie Tucker and Juan Self of **Self Tucker Architects** had in mind when they bought the building in 2006.

"In our location, which is still a transitional neighborhood, it was important to have a place where people, both in the building and from outside, can come, interact and get to know one another," Tucker said.

As an entrepreneur herself, when she learned Self Tucker was partnering with the City of Memphis to make the building a hub for small and minority business activities, Moore-Alston was sold.

"I know how it is for small businesses to come in and not know what the next step is," she said.

Plans for the cafe also include build-your-own parfait and premium salad bars and a full espresso bar. The cafe will be open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, with a variety of menu items that will appeal to a "Downtown palette."

Signature Sweet Potato Baby pastries and desserts will be paired with a bistro-style menu of paninos and subs, house-made sweet potato chips and a burger Moore-Alston is creating for the James Beard Foundation's Blended Burger Project — a mix of mushrooms, beef and turkey.

"We're calling it the Uptown Funk Burger, but we may need to call it the Downtown Funk Burger," Moore-Alston said.

As developers, Tucker and Self received approval this week for an extension of a previously approved \$300,000 development loan and a previously approved nine-year property tax break for the Universal Life project.

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*Memphis Business Journal*

