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## Famed 'The Pit' BBQ to open Bull City eatery, sans Mitchell

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BY LAURA OLENIACZ

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DURHAM -- A Raleigh company is planning to open a second location of the barbecue restaurant The Pit in downtown Durham, and company officials said operations should not be affected by the departure of renowned pitmaster Ed Mitchell.

Greg Hatem, founder and CEO of the Raleigh development company Empire Properties that owns and manages six restaurants in the Capital City through its restaurant division Empire Eats, said this will be the company's first restaurant in Durham.

In addition to The Pit, Empire Eats' Raleigh restaurants include Sitti, The Raleigh Times Bar, The Morning Times coffee shop, Gravy, and Fai Thai. Although the company does not currently have a restaurant in Durham, The Pit is the barbecue vendor at the Durham Bulls Athletic Park.

Hatem said it was in 2007 when he and Mitchell partnered to open The Pit in Raleigh, which serves eastern North Carolina-style, whole hog, pit-cooked barbecue. At the time, Hatem said Mitchell was trying to figure out whether he was going to open another restaurant in Wilson, or pursue other options.

While working at The Pit, Hatem said Mitchell got national press attention through appearances on the Today Show, Throwdown with Bobby Flay, and other media outlets.

Mitchell is leaving The Pit in order to open his own restaurant plans and to pursue other other ventures, and Hatem said there won't be any changes at the restaurant as a result of his departure.

He said Mitchell wasn't involved in the restaurant's day-to-day operations. He said it took a culinary team to cook the barbecue because of the volume of people the restaurant serves during the week.

"We've been talking about this, honestly, for over a year," he said. "We just kind of wanted to go in different directions. Ed's been a great spokesman at The Pit, he has a great way of talking about North Carolina barbecue. We're more focused on The Pit brand, and I think he wanted to pursue things under the Ed Mitchell brand."

Hatem said the new Durham location of The Pit will be similar to what is offered at The Pit in Raleigh, offering upscale barbecue made from the whole hog-cooked, free range pigs.

Hatem said the company is looking to open the Durham location at the end of this year, or in the first quarter of next year.

The location of the new Durham restaurant hasn't been announced, but Hatem said it will be around 8,000 square feet and will have a little more than 200 seats.

Empire owns about 40 buildings in Raleigh, and property in Durham as well. According to Durham County Tax Administration records, Empire Alliance Properties LLC owns three commercial properties downtown.

All of the properties in the records are on East Chapel Hill Street, at 309 E. Chapel Hill St., at 320 E. Chapel Hill St., and at 322 E. Chapel Hill St.

"It'll be very similar to what we're doing (at The Pit in Raleigh), a great upscale feel but casual dining, with a full bar," Hatem said. "We're bringing barbecue up a notch like we've done in Raleigh, having some fun with it, pairing it with some great beers and some great bourbon."



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Hatem said he believes what brought national attention to Mitchell and The Pit is the restaurant's mixture of an upscale atmosphere with "absolutely traditional, N.C.-barbecue."

"We're not cooking with rotisserie smokers, this is the real deal, we've got pits in the restaurant," he said. "At one of our places, you can sit at The Pit bar, and watch them cook and prepare food. I think what's gotten a lot of attention from the national press, traditional food, and kicking it up to almost fine dining and the white table cloth environment."

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