



Nomination Category	Outstanding Dining Business
Population Size: Based on the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau	Rural (city with population of 10,000 or less, or a county that is among the 33 least populated in Iowa)
Organization/Individual Being Nominated	The Centennial
Nominee Contact Name	Sara Ostrander
Nominee Address	Street Address: 100 E State St City: Jefferson State / Province: Iowa Postal / Zip Code: 50129
Nominee E-mail	<a href="mailto:thecentennialjefferson@gmail.com">thecentennialjefferson@gmail.com</a>
Nominee Phone Number	(515) 386-3888
Nomination Submitted By:	Molly Cunningham
Nominator E-mail (Note: A copy of this nomination will automatically go to this address after you submit it. This can be left blank).	<a href="mailto:info@jeffersonmatters.org">info@jeffersonmatters.org</a>
Nominator Phone Number	(515) 386-2155
Scoring Criteria: The nominee's work to cultivate and enhance tourism in Iowa is clearly stated. Provide commentary on why they are deserving of recognition. (10 points possible)	Jefferson lost its well-known tearoom four years ago after it was destroyed by a water line break that poured 44,000 gallons of water into the restaurant. After it closed, the loss of tourism to downtown was immediate and significant. Bus tours stopped coming to town or would limit their hours here, day trippers were limited to certain days of the week because most restaurants were closed on Monday, and even our own residents needed a nice sit-down restaurant. All these groups needed a restaurant that would be open especially during lunch Monday-Friday.

The former owner of the tearoom decided not to return; the City of Jefferson acquired the building. A group of women investors formed as “Why Not Us” with the goal to purchase and renovate this 148-year-old historic building called the Centennial Block with the end goal of bringing a restaurant back to downtown but needed a great chef. Sara Ostrander was that chef! She had always dreamed of owning her own restaurant; the timing was perfect for her to say yes!

Sara opened The Centennial in July 2022 and the crowds have not stopped coming since. Her food and desserts have been noticed as she was named one of 2022’s 40 Women to Watch in Hospitality by the Iowa Restaurant Association. Her ability to work with individuals and groups to bring people to the square has helped return bus tours, shoppers, and visitors to our downtown once again. The retailers in our community noticed a definite uptick in their walk-in traffic and would ask what brought them to Jefferson. Invariably it was The Centennial and Sara’s reputation of fabulous food and hospitality happening in the newly renovated Centennial Block.

Sara, a Greene County native, graduated from culinary school and completed a business management degree. That combination – culinary talent and business acumen – is what drew Why Not Us to Sara when they began recruiting someone to own and operate a restaurant in downtown Jefferson. Sara wanted to help Jefferson’s tourism industry by being open when many of our other restaurants are closed downtown. Several Iowa bus tour companies have come back to Jefferson, and many are again planning to visit our community, to see our tourists attractions, and shop in our downtown businesses once they found out that The Centennial was open for business.

Sara changes her menus weekly with delicious new soups, entrées, and desserts. She has her signature dessert called Better Than Bell Tower Cake honoring our Mahanay Bell Tower; she teamed up with local Greene Bean Coffee for her own blend of coffee. She works with tourism groups coming to town on menu selections that fit their tastes and time. All these accommodations are paving off as we are

seeing an increase in bus tours again! Chef Sara and The Centennial have become a reason to come to Jefferson for a day of shopping and dining in a place where people can experience fabulous cuisine in a beautiful national historic building.

Scoring Criteria: The nominee showed originality and creativity in overcoming their challenges. (10 points possible)

The idea of planning to open a brand-new restaurant during the time of the pandemic and the unknown of indoor dining ever happening again, along with a building that was just an empty shell, created a lot of challenges for a young restaurateur. Sadly, many restaurants in Iowa had to close because of the aftereffects of the pandemic. Thoughts of retreat, however, never materialized or took away from achieving the end goal of opening up a new sit-down restaurant in downtown Jefferson. Sara had the support of the 72 women of Why Not Us during this time. The adventure was truly a lesson for the community in women helping women.

The building renovation went on for almost two years due to setbacks with supplies and funding. The women of Why Not Us were still fundraising for the renovation during this time, acquiring the perfect contractor and architect and kept Sara abreast at all stages of the renovation. Sara, the architect, and contractor stayed in constant contact when it came time to discuss new kitchen layouts and what she would need to have as a commercial kitchen in a new space and how a new dining room would work. During that time, the possibilities to create the perfect restaurant were a blank slate which Sara used to her advantage. Sara used this down time by working on and fine tuning her workable and doable small business plan with SBDC, designing her kitchen to her specifications with the architect and contractor, working with another female small business owner on her logo, designing her Facebook page, locating, and deciding on the furniture and table service that would fit in the new space, and creating extraordinary menus.

To introduce Sara to the community, long before the restaurant opened for business, Why Not Us held a meet and greet at the local Welcome Center along with a buffet of appetizers created by Sara for people to try. To test some of the menu options she was creating before the restaurant was open. Sara did several larger catering events that

acquired rave reviews of her menus. Sara has offered box lunches for different organizations and events to keep her culinary skills sharp while simultaneously introducing her potential to the public.

The Centennial is only open during lunch hours and a challenge Sara faced was that customers were reaching out with requests for late night availability. So, Sara has recently been putting on limited “Pasta Nights” where customers can purchase take home meals for supper. She announces the limited menu on Facebook and customers can come in from 4:30-7:00 to pick up.

Scoring Criteria: The nominee showed innovation in developing new tourism markets, unconventional approaches to old markets or new technology uses. (10 points possible)

Even though still a relatively new business owner and chef of her own restaurant, Sara has adapted quickly doing in person interviews with local print media, local radio, the Des Moines Register and on KCCI’s This is Iowa segment with Eric Hanson as if she has been doing this her whole life. Her ability to relate to people is infectious.

Reaching out to new markets, Sara worked with a philanthropic organization to help with their fundraising efforts, supplied local banks box lunches for their in-services, worked with the local school for their back-to-school events and served box lunches to a farmer’s co-op during harvest season. Farmer usually don’t frequent fancy restaurants during harvest, but we are confident when the harvest was complete, they came for the experience of dining at The Centennial in person.

Her restaurant was a feature in Our Iowa magazine and in the Travel Iowa Fall/Winter guide in 2023. She has claimed her business on Google and has created The Centennial Facebook page. Her social media following is growing each week, and she has 2,500 followers on her Facebook page after being open for just a year and a half. She always posts her new menus with many pictures of her dishes and her preparations weekly. She created an Instagram account for The Centennial and has a QR code that people can scan to follow her Instagram account easily. She uses physical business cards and prints handouts that tell the story of the restaurant and the renovation of the building that people can take with them. She has The Centennial listed on the Travel Iowa website, the Jefferson Iowa App, and the

Experience Jefferson website.

She uses up-to-date point-of-sale equipment. Sara uses the face-to-face marketing of walking around to the tables to greet her customers and ask how their meal is to the delight of the patrons. All these marketing venues and ideas are great but the thing that really is the best publicity is word of mouth and honest reviews. Hundreds of people have come through the door of The Centennial, and they are spreading the word of this young chef, the ambience found in the renovated historic building and the great food that can be experienced when one travels to Jefferson whether for pleasure or for business.

Scoring criteria:  
Shared any measurable numbers such as a return on investment, visitor numbers, revenue, etc, to quantify how the nominee supported the Iowa tourism industry as a whole. (10 points possible)

The impact of opening this restaurant downtown has been significant. Retail businesses need visitors in our downtown. A quality restaurant adds to the list of reasons why our community was recently named an Iowa Great Place in 2022.

Bonnie Silbaugh, owner of Fudges Flowers and Gifts, reported in June and July of 2022 that her sales were up 30% in dollar value from the year before. In those two months alone, she saw an increase of 120 more front-counter sales. She credits this with a direct link to the opening of the restaurant. Bonnie always asks why people come to town and the reply has been they are either going to dine at The Centennial or they have just eaten at The Centennial.

The Promotion Committee of Jefferson Matters made up of retailers all report a positive impact in downtown since the opening of The Centennial and an overall feeling of encouragement for the months ahead. Pat Richards, tour coordinator at the Mahanay Bell Tower, credits the opening of the restaurant to more people coming to the top of the tower. They had a record crowd of over 7,000 this season (1,000 more than last season) with people from 49 states, 3 European countries and 5 continents visiting and many of them had just eaten or were going to eat at The Centennial. Sara reported to the board of Why Not Us this month that her numbers have been awesome. She has a signature dessert called Better Than Bell Tower Cake and sold 1,124 slices in 2022 and served 1,800 slices of this specialty cake in 2023. She said that cheesecake sales are not far behind.

Three fundraising dinners for local philanthropic organizations, two life-long learning groups from Drake and ISU, and 40 leadership Iowa participants have all dined at The Centennial.

In 2023, Sara hosted four sold out themed cookie decorating classes along with a sold-out Valentine Sweetheart dinner. During Halloween, she collaborated with the local women owned businesses to create a “Ghouls Night Out” event, which sold out within 30 minutes of her posting the event. She will also be doing a “Galentine’s Night Out” this month with the same local group. She worked with Deal’s Orchard during their Fall Festival to provide box lunches so guests could have a meal option. Sara and her staff helped serve RAGBRAI riders during this year’s pass-through. Market to Market race organizers expressed concern over lack of meal options along the route this year. Sara stepped up to offer “on-the-go” lunches tailored to fit the needs of runners along the race.

The total renovation of the building that houses The Centennial cost \$595,748.08. Unit holders of Why Not Us don’t expect a return on that investment other than what it can do for the community. The Centennial Block building housing The Centennial has now been awarded the designation of a contributing building to the Jefferson Square Commercial Historic District.

Scoring criteria:  
Project showed positive impact on the community and state (10 points possible).

No matter what attraction a community has, if food is unavailable for lunch in the community, visitors and tours either tend to leave the community early or not even stop at all. With several restaurants closing since the pandemic, we are fortunate to have a thriving new restaurant in downtown. Uniqueness of a locally owned restaurant restored by a women investor group run by a young woman following her dreams has attracted customers from all over the state. Bus tours are beginning to learn that we once again have a restaurant they can include in their itinerary are returning to Jefferson. Before or after dining, tourists can experience our other unique attractions: Mahanay Bell Tower, public art, alley renovations, public gardens and the roof top art that is only found in Jefferson.

Foot traffic at our iconic Mahanay Bell Tower increased with over 7,000 people this season from 48 states, 3 European countries and 5 continents. Retail businesses in our community have noticed a sudden uptick in people from out of town coming through their doors either before or after their meal at The Centennial. The north side of our square, which does not sit on the Lincoln Highway, sometimes has struggled for the “attention” of tourists. The Centennial has given these diners a reason to experience our intact walkable square to experience what else there is to be found in downtown Jefferson. A card and stationary store, Warm Wishes, opened recently on the north side of the square because they knew the traffic was increasing on that side of the square. The flower shop, also on the north side has reported record sales since The Centennial has opened.

State-wide coverage of Why Not Us and The Centennial working together has brought many people to Jefferson to learn how they could replicate this business model. This includes members of the Iowa Women’s Federation and a large group of retailers from Red Wing, Minnesota. A group of young women in Jefferson were inspired by Why Not US and Sara and opened up their own drive through coffee shop this summer, CHiRP, for travelers on Highway 30. Being named one of the 40 Women to Watch in the Iowa Restaurant Business in 2022, Sara joins other restauranteurs that are continually adding to and supporting the experiences of the overall tourism found not only in our own community, but across our state of Iowa.

Restaurants are a central figure in the tourism picture because when you are suddenly left without a great restaurant as Jefferson experienced in 2019, you quickly learn just how much they are needed in that overall picture of the community’s tourism sector. Closing of an eatery can be swift and sudden and the ripple it causes affects everyone who is in business in a community. Chef Sara Ostrander opening The Centennial restaurant featuring contemporary taste with historic charm has created a positive ripple in our community and has turned our tourism on an upward and extremely tasty trajectory.

supporting documents  
and/or photos. (file  
size limit 20 MB each)

[The Centennial Cookie Night.jpg](#)  
[The Centennial Our Iowa Story.jpg](#)  
[The Centennial Pasta Night.jpg](#)  
[The Centennial RAGBRAI.jpg](#)