SCHENECTADY — When Kevin Brown and his wife, Robin, were looking to open a new restaurant, the building at 617 Union St. and its neighborhood made downtown Schenectady an attractive location.

"It wasn't until we saw that block and all the development that was going on that we decided to choose Schenectady," said Kevin Brown, whose establishment, Cafe NOLA (an acronym for New Orleans, La.) is celebrating its fifth year in business this month.

"We did some research, we saw that the mayor and Metroplex were doing a good job of revitalizing that area, so we signed a five-year lease. And I don't plan on moving anytime soon."

His wife is in complete agreement.

"A realtor suggested we try out downtown Schenectady, and Kevin actually saw it first and told me I have to see this," remembered Robin Brown.

"We had been thinking much more about Albany or Troy than Schenectady. But when I saw it I told Kevin, 'you're right. This is the place.' I just got a good feeling looking at that whole area and everything that was going on."

The 600 block of Union Street includes three other restaurants, the Manhattan Exchange (607 Union), Marotta's (611) and Bier Abbey (613). While the neighborhood doesn't have the historic ambience of the Stockade or the bright lights of Proctors on State Street, it is creating a buzz all its own.

The Browns and their landlord, Reza Mahoutchian, completely remodeled the two-story interior of the building, which was built just before the Civil War. There wasn't a lot they had to do with the exterior.

"The front is pretty much the same historic-looking building that it's been since it was built in the 1850s," said Robin Brown. "We did some landscaping, and we did a lot of work on the interior. It was a lawyer's office for 50 years, so the layout was quite different and we had to move things around."

The city of Schenectady east of the Erie Canal was just beginning to be developed when the canal opened in 1825. Union College was farther east at its current location, and in time the area between the campus and the original village — the Stockade section — began being filled up with new homes.

"In the 1860s, that was an upper-class neighborhood," said Frank Taormina, a former Niskayuna High administrator and history teacher who has extensively researched Schenectady's growth in the 19th and 20th centuries. "Very prominent people, like Walter McQueen, were building their homes there."

McQueen, the top designer of steam engines at the Schenectady Locomotive Works, built his house at 613 Union St., now home to Bier Abbey. That block is only a small part of a much longer stretch of Union Street that was named a historic district on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

Doris Manley, a former Schenectady resident who worked for the New York State Division of Historic Preservation, put together the nomination document that was presented to the National Park Service relating to the Union Street neighborhood.

Referring specifically to the 600 and 700 block of Union, the document stated that while most buildings abut the street, "all structures on the north side of Union Street between Barrett Street and Seward Place were set back at least twenty feet from the sidewalk in order to provide a view of the Union College campus."

As a result of someone's foresight nearly a century and a half ago, Cafe NOLA and its three neighbors in the restaurant business now all have patio seating, a feature that has added to the area's popularity.

"It's really helped make this spot a destination," said Kevin Brown. "I think the success of this block is beyond our expectations."

"It's nice to see the growth of this block, and Cafe NOLA has added a lot of color down here," said Walter Supley, who moved his business, Creative Advantage, into the old German Lutheran Church across the street back in 1989.

"We love the food over there. We take our customers there and our employees often go there for lunch. It's been nice to be a part of it, and to see it all coming back."

As you might expect from its name, Cafe NOLA offers its customers specialities such as Crawfish Jambalaya and alligator.

"We specialize in Cajun and Southern food but we're certainly not limited to that," said Kevin Brown. "We have burgers and sandwiches, and when you walk into our restaurant, it's like you're walking into my home. We have gluten-free food, and we have things covered for any kind of dietary need you might have. Vegan, lactose-free, gluten-free, whatever. I'll walk right out to the table so the customer can specify their needs."

Brown studied culinary arts at Johnson and Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island. He and his wife started their own successful catering service about five years before opening up Cafe NOLA.

"Kevin is our head chef, and I think he started liking Cajun food when he was working for the Marriott," said Robin Brown.

"We work on the menu together, and my daughter also works with us. A lot of people like our red beans and rice, our blackened fish sandwiches, and we also have our specialty lemonades. I'd say about 90 percent of our food is made on the premises. We still do catering, and we're also at the Schenectady Green Market on Sundays."

Along with various family members, the Browns typically have four full-time employees on staff at Cafe NOLA. They're closed on Mondays, but open the rest of the week at 11 a.m. to serve lunch, and stay open until 9 or 10 p.m., sometimes later on the weekend. Live music is usually performed on Fridays and Saturdays.

Robin Brown is overjoyed with the restaurant's success, although she jokes that at times Cafe NOLA attracts visitors who refuse to pay a cent.

"Yes, it's been a bit quiet lately but in the past we've had ghosts," said Brown, whose establishment was the law office of Union College grad and Schenectady native Wolfgang Riemer for nearly 50 years in

"We've had four different paranormal studies done here and they're always finding activity. At first I was a little worried but it doesn't bother me anymore. I think they've accepted us. Maybe one of them is Wolfgang."