

Colonial Steak House: A Pine Bluff tradition

BY KAT ROBINSON

The Tudor-style building at the corner of 8th and Pine streets in Pine Bluff started out as an elementary school back in 1912. After World War II, it served as a training facility for returning veterans. But today, it's home to a long-running restaurant.

Colonial Steak House actually started out in an antebellum home at the corner of 5th and Beech, not too far away. It was the creation of Mildred Compton, who opened it on Aug. 10, 1973. She later sold it to Scott Mouser. After a fire destroyed the old house on Beech in 1987, Mouser moved the restaurant to the current location. In 1993, Mouser sold the restaurant to Joe

and Donna Coker. The Cokers took on a restaurant that had long established itself as a hub for the community,



Dana Gateley, restaurant owner.

a place where families came for every important life event. In June, Dana Gateley, who had been a waitress at the restaurant for more than 25 years, and her husband, Wayne, bought it.

"The steakhouse has an amazing legacy of support," Dana said during a recent visit. "I have been brought to tears more times in the past month. Business people have come out in support, asking 'What we can do for you?' 'How can we help?'"

A family tradition

"We see the third generation of the same families," Dana said. "We do their proms and their engagement parties, and their wedding receptions. The kids come in the first time in high chairs and we see them through graduation and their wedding receptions."

Colonial Steak House has an interesting business model. It's only open for dinner Tuesday through Saturday nights, and it never advertises for hires because family members of staff come in when extra bodies are needed. Many members of the staff have other jobs as well. Some employees



The Colonial Steak House serves up big steaks and "monster" prime rib.

have been there 40 years, and there have even been three generations of the same family working there at the same time.

That kind of commitment is part of what makes Colonial Steak House special.

"I think that maybe that has something to do with the success of the steakhouse. It has always been community owned. Everyone has a stake at the Colonial. Everyone in the



Cotton Blossoms and apricot brandy sauce.

the eating essentials

COLONIAL STEAK HOUSE

111 W 8th Ave.
Pine Bluff
(870) 536-3488

Hours of Operation

Tuesday - Saturday: 5:00 - 9:00 p.m.



community; customers from other cities like Conway, Little Rock, Beebe, Monticello, Dumas ... on any particular Saturday night we may have 10 cities represented from 50 miles away."

A group effort

It's not just who eats there that defines the place. Colonial Steak House's menu has been knit together from the recommendations of its patrons and the suggestions of its staff. Veronica Scarver, who started working there when she was just 14 years old, is responsible for the famed Black Bottom Pie, while others developed the popular Cotton Blossoms with apricot brandy sauce and the signature au gratin potatoes. Dana has kept most of the recipes, adding Baltimore-style lump crab cakes and a dish of shrimp scampi over fettuccine. Those big steaks, though, continue to be the main draw.

And then there's the Roast Prime of Beef.

"Other restaurants take that standing seven-bone rib," Dana said. "They take the rib out, cook the meat and then slice it and get 20 steaks out of it. We slice it into seven steaks and cook it directly over the fire. We don't pre-bake and slice it. That's why it doesn't have the leathery texture of most prime ribs. And it became one of the signature dishes, the Roast Prime of Beef, the monster."

I've been privy to that experience. On one visit, we ordered Cotton Blossoms and French onion soup, and salad and bread and reserved some Black Bottom Pie, and then out came my Roast Prime of Beef. Someone at another table actually whistled. The Internet, at least what was connected to my social media channels, blew up



The Roast Prime of Beef.

for a while over the enormity of it.

Speaking of the Internet, Dana is savvy to what customers are doing these days. When her staff spots someone photographing their food with a cell phone — especially the Roast Prime of Beef — she'll take a dollar off their bill. "If they're taking photos of my food," she said, "that's free advertising. Who wouldn't want that?"

The Gateleys have made a few other recent changes, redecorating the restaurant to a Tuscan theme. They're leaving one room that will soon be decked out in photography of the city's restaurant past; a museum full of nostalgia for those generational customers who even still keep coming back. Dana understands the restaurant's importance.

"It's hard to describe the history of it," she said, beaming. "The history (of the Colonial Steak House) is the history of the people of Pine Bluff. They are what made the history of the restaurant. It's like the knitting of the fabric — every string is a family, every strand is the history of this family. I have been asked why in the world I would buy the restaurant at my age. Well, I didn't buy it for me. I bought it for the families." ■

Kat Robinson is a Little Rock-based freelance writer.

Dining recommendations? Contact Rob Roedel at rroedel@aecc.com

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