

Comfort served at Clintonville diner for decades - Columbus Dispatch, The (OH) - October 25, 2006 - page 01F

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Cindy King doesn't claim to be an aficionado of fine food.

"I'm no chef, just a cook" she says.

Her restaurant, Nancy's, exudes the comfort and simplicity of home with an affable staff and heaping portions of heartfelt cooking. She doesn't flaunt ornately composed dishes nor adhere to the latest culinary trends, but her down-to-earth brand of home-style cooking has been ingrained into the routines of Clintonville residents for 36 years.

As a lifelong resident, King is rooted in the North Side neighborhood.

"Clintonville is in my blood, I was raised here and I'll likely die here," she said. "I take a lot of pride in what I serve to people because they're friends and neighbors."

King has been dishing up home-cooked meals at Nancy's since 1970 when, at the age of 20, she purchased the neighborhood diner from Nancy Kemmerling.

"I didn't want to buy a new sign, so I bought Nancy's name for \$100, giving me the rights for 100 years. People call me Nancy all the time. It's kind of funny."

It might seem unthinkable that a 20-year-old could have the wherewithal to establish such a longstanding business, but King laughs at the notion of formal training. "Running this place for 36 years has been trial and error, and that's been my training."

Childhood years spent in the kitchen with her mother, grandmother and great aunt instilled three generations of culinary expertise in King. Almost every recipe in her repertoire -- including her famous pot roast, liver and onions and her version of Johnny Marzetti -- was passed down from one of these three women.

Throughout the years, King has developed a timeless formula of simplicity, friendliness and comfort cooking that has allowed Nancy's to endure four decades of dietary fads. With only one menu offering each evening, there is no need to flip through long, jumbled menus; just ask what's cooking.

King's jovial presence and lighthearted demeanor bolster a homey atmosphere that has helped her establish a strong base of regular customers.

John Dawson, an 80-year-old local resident has eaten lunch at Nancy's almost every afternoon since King first opened the doors.

"People are friendly here, and the food is great. Cindy sort of keeps me alive," Dawson said. "She

really makes you feel like part of the family."

In an era in which corporate restaurant chains dominate the food scene, mom and pop restaurants have become somewhat of a novelty. In Clintonville, Nancy's is all that's left from a simpler time and place.

"I remember when the small diners were everywhere. Jack Horner's Corner was just down the block, Marie's was on Duncan and High, and Warren's Sandwich Shop was just up the street," King said.

King's famous meatloaf and succulent cobblers are a taste from the past, and provide a mouthwatering dose of nostalgia with every bite.

"The older folks eat here because we offer them familiar food, the old fashioned way," King said.

Located near OSU campus, Nancy's is not without a loyal following of young customers in search of a cheap, nourishing meal to break the monotony of pizza and Hot Pockets. King said that most young people haven't been exposed to authentic comfort food.

"These kids were raised on macaroni and cheese from a box," she said, laughing. "We give them the real thing, and they love it."

From rich stocks and thick-cut noodles, to freshly ground hamburger patties, everything at Nancy's is prepared from scratch.

King's commitment to her community exceeds the devotion to her customers at Nancy's. For over 20 years, she has prepared and delivered Thanksgiving dinners to elderly people and special-needs patients who might otherwise go without a holiday meal.

Her civic involvement doesn't end with the holiday season; King's contribution is year-round. She feeds volunteers at an annual toy drive, cooks for church fundraisers and donates food to Faith Mission.

Each child that comes through the door at Nancy's, leaves with a quarter to put in their college fund. Whether the money goes toward an Ivy League education or a handful of nickel candy, this tender gesture personifies King.

When asked why she feels compelled to give so much for her community King simply shrugs and said, "Somebody's got to do it."

Nancy's Meatloaf

Makes about 6 loaves (12 to 14 servings)

This recipe is one from Cindy King's mother. It is one of Columbus' most decorated meatloaf recipes, and won Ohio Magazine's best meatloaf award in 1991. This dish is not made in a loaf pan to ensure that all sides are well-browned. The recipe feeds a crowd but can easily be cut in half for

a smaller gathering.

3 pounds ground chuck

6 large eggs

1 medium onion, chopped

5 cups (12 ounces) dry stuffing mix

1 tablespoon granulated garlic

2 cups tomato juice

1 tablespoon salt

2 teaspoons freshly ground pepper

Preheat oven to 350 degrees

In a large bowl, mix all ingredients until well combined.

Using your hands, shape the mixture into 6 individual-sized loaves.

Insert a rack into a baking sheet to allow the meat to drain while baking. Bake the loaves on the racks for 1 to 1 1/2 hours, or until an instant read thermometer reads 165 degrees.

PER SERVING: 370 calories; 21 g protein; 22 g carbohydrates; 4 g fiber; 22 g fat (8 g saturated); 114 mg cholesterol; 984 mg sodium

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