

Lucille's Country Cooking

By Pat Johnson



Karen Bates-Flynn, Diane Brown and her daughter Kim Lohr at Lucille's.
Photo credit: Pat Johnson.

Lucille's Country Cooking in Warren Grove is a popular breakfast and lunch eatery serving great food at good prices but it's more than that. In the tiny hamlet of Warren Grove, Lucille's is the community's gathering place, the place where locals keep up to date on news and each other's health and well-being. In that way it's a throw back to easier times when community was more than a catch phrase. Lucille's is smack dab in the Pinelands and the restaurant sees many tourists and dedicated local diners, and is responsible for sending

a great number of folks to the newly renovated Cedar Bridge Tavern Historic Site and Ocean County Park to enjoy outdoor recreation and tales of the last documented land engagement of the American Revolution.

Lucille's is named for Lucille Bates Wickward who started the business with her husband James Bates in 1975. After she passed in January, 2016, her two daughters, Diane Brown and Karen Bates-Flynn took over the business. Both worked other jobs: Diane only recently retired as a purchasing specialist for Stafford Township and Karen has kept her school bus driver job.

“We wanted to continue Mom’s traditions,” said Karen. “And continue what she taught us, ‘Be kind, be generous and make sure you laugh.’”

Diane gave a short history of how Lucille's came to be. According to Diane, her father told her mom that they were opening a hot dog stand connected to his new welding business but when her mom saw the building it was much more than that. “She thought it would be like a take-out window but it was more like a diner and she was so shy! Painfully shy. At first she wouldn't come out from the kitchen and talk to people. But once she realized people were kind she started talking and then she couldn't stop,” said Diane. “She could read people very well. She could tell if they were upset or needed to talk, she was like everybody's mom or grandmom.”

The business took off. In the 1970's, when Atlantic City was booming, trucks would be driving Route 539 to the various sandpits to supply the concrete to

build the Casinos. “So we had a lot of truck drivers,” said Diane. “Our father always said the best places to eat are where the truck drivers stop,” said Karen. Her parents kept the place open from 5 a.m. till 3 p.m. Karen was only five years old when the family moved to Warren Grove and Diane was thirteen. As with many family businesses the kids were put to work as soon as they were able.

“Diane started waitressing right off the bat and I started peeling potatoes when I was six or seven,” said Karen. “We both made hamburger patties using a press that we had. We did dishes,” added Diane. “We were always closed one day a week—it was our family day.”

The sisters work well together and their personalities compliment each other—Diane mainly runs the

Lucille's continued...

business end of things –purchasing food and paying bills while Karen is the social director. “I’m like my mom and she’s like my Dad,” said Karen. Both their daughters, Kim Lohr and Lauryn Flynn also work at the restaurant.

“All our customers get along,” said Diane.

“They color our life. It’s amazing how accepting people are here—you start a conversation and everyone joins in - So you’re not dinning along,” said Karen.

Laughter has always been a staple at Lucille’s. “Mother put a ‘road kill special’ on the menu as a joke —possum today, raccoon tomorrow—you could tell if someone was from way out of town—they’d look at the menu and point it out and my mom would laugh –‘Got ‘em.’”

In 2015, the famous food critic and TV personality Anthony Bourdain put the restaurant on the map by including Lucille’s on his TV show and Lucille’s became part of his official Anthony Bourdain New Jersey Food Trail. The Food Trail is still part of the VisitNJ.org travel guide.

“People still come through on that,” said Diane. “All our food and soups are homemade, and are Mom’s recipes except for a few we have added.”

Tourists also stop to get their photo op with the 8-foot tall Jersey Devil statue in the parking lot. This dapper Jersey Devil is the second iteration by chainsaw artist Joe Wenal, the first one was stolen in May of 2023.

“The day it was stolen, I called him and he was heartbroken,” said Diane. “He said, ‘I’ll get started right now.’ That was May and he delivered it in October. This one has more detail because he spent more time on it.”

Tourism in the pines didn’t stop during the COVID outbreak, it actually improved, said Karen. “People got outdoors again—it’s like they rediscovered something they didn’t know they had missed. We had hikers, bikers, bird watchers, people looking for

wildflowers, people just wanting to get away from commercialized places.”

Being out in the heart of the Pine Plains, an area known for its fast-moving forest fires doesn’t faze the sisters. “We’re kind of protected here. Over there (to the west) is the swamp...and fires generally come from that direction. The one big, big fire, (June 2023 burned 5,000 acres) it was a day like this - blue sky, you couldn’t tell there was a fire.” said Diane.



Jersey Devil statue by Joe Wenal.
Photo Credit: Pat Johnson.

At present Lucille’s no longer has the contract to supply the New Jersey Forest Fire Service with food during a fire, “But back in the day when we had a fire, the commander would drive to the house and say, ‘Lucille, we need 500 sandwiches, and she would get us up out of bed and we go would make them,’” said Diane.

The look of Lucille’s, with all its quirky character, will be getting a spruce up for the 50th Anniversary but don’t expect much to change—it will still be exactly what you didn’t know you needed—home-cooking with a friendly, family atmosphere.

Lucille’s Country Cooking is located at 1496 Rte. 539, Warren Grove. <https://www.lucillescountrycooking.com/>