

RESTAURANT ADDS TO DIVERSITY OF HUBERS' FAMILY FARM

their fruit and vegetable farm located near Starlight, Ind. "Although this was entirely new to us, we were still confident that a restaurant featuring country-style dinners, our fresh fruit and vegetables and friendly atmosphere and service would really help draw more customers to our pick-your-own farm," says Joe, who is also president of the Indiana Vegetable Growers Association.

More people are eating out at restaurants nowadays than they were a few years ago, and this growing trend has caught the attention of some enterprising roadside marketers who operate near large metropolitan areas.

In July 1983, for example, Joe and Bonnie Huber and their family built a restaurant on

At first, Joe and Bonnie anticipated the restaurant would draw at least 500 people during the weekend. However, when they opened the restaurant, the number of customers rapidly climbed as the word spread around about this unique country restaurant. "The response was overwhelming," says Joe. "Today, we often



Known for its wholesome, country-style cooking, people come from miles around to eat at the Joe Huber Family Restaurant near Starlight, Ind. Shown here are, from left to right: Beverly Huber; Joe Huber III and his wife, Kathy; Joe Huber, Sr. and his wife, Bonnie; Louie Huber and his wife, Katie; Tracey and her husband, Chuck Huber.

serve 6,000 meals during the week, and two-thirds of those are served during weekends.”

The Hubers’ family restaurant has been successful for several reasons. First, there are more than one million people within a 30-mile radius of the Joe Huber Family Farm, Orchard and Restaurant, covering such cities as Louisville, Ky. and New Albany, Jeffersonville and Clarksville, Ind. Joe also produces his own radio commercials for the restaurant and farm and airs them during a popular gardening program on a Louisville station.

Country-Style Cooking

However, the biggest selling point of the restaurant has been its excellent reputation for wholesome, country-style cooking. The restaurant always features country-style fried chicken served with home-grown vegetables, potatoes, dumplings and fried biscuits with Hubers’ homemade apple butter or honey. “The biscuits served with apple butter are very popular,” says Joe. “Sometimes we have served as many as 3,600 biscuits daily during the weekend. Even during the summer, we often serve 6,000 ears of sweet corn in the restaurant during weekends.”

The restaurant menu also features soups, salads, sandwiches and other entrees, such as Amish ham, farm-raised catfish and steaks. The meals can be topped off with the Hubers’ fruit cobblers or fruit of the season or homemade pies.

To minimize construction costs, the restaurant is a 50 by 100 pole-type building. The restaurant, which is kept immaculate inside and out, can seat 270 and has a modern, well-equipped kitchen for cooking food in large volumes. To create a warm feeling, the walls inside are lined with native Yellow-poplar boards. Throughout the restaurant, the walls are also decorated with color paintings from a local artist, and there is a dance floor and

stage area in one corner of the restaurant where customers are treated to live country western music on weekends. Behind the stage is a mural painting of the Hubers’ family farm. Outside, the restaurant is well-landscaped with shrubs and flowers, and there is parking for 800 cars. The restaurant can also be reserved for banquets, parties and family reunions.

Since large crowds flock to the restaurant on weekends, Joe and his sons, Joe III, Louie and Chuck, also added two carry-out windows on the northeast side of the restaurant where customers can order from the full menu. An 18 by 110 patio with an awning was constructed on the east side of the building where people can sit down and eat in the shade. This patio seats 92 people.

But even this wasn’t enough to handle the overflow from the restaurant on weekends. That’s when Joe masterminded the Chuck Wagon Dinner. Using a covered wagon equipped with a 12-foot long, gas-fired grill, people can order hot dogs, bratwursts or the specialty that includes a full, 16-ounce porterhouse steak along with corn on the cob (still in the husk) and a baked potato stuffed with green peppers and sweet onions with a sprinkle of real bacon bits on top. Apple cobblers and soft drinks are also available. A tent, which is leased, is set up for seating another 120 people. “Instead of adding on to the restaurant, the Chuck Wagon Dinner was a low-cost way of serving more people,” Joe says. “But my sons and I are seriously considering building a more permanent structure that is more rustic looking than a tent.”

The girls serving the Chuck Wagon Dinner are dressed up in Indian costumes, and the boys who cook the meals wear cowboy outfits. People can also sit on sun dried logs or straw bales and listen to a live country western band while eating. “We create a super atmosphere,” says Joe. “It’s country, and it really turns people on. I like to call it profit through entertainment farming.”

Many of the planned activities on the Huber farm focus on family entertainment. Square dance clubs often come to perform at the farm. Hay rides are offered, and the children can get some corn to feed the ducks at one of the irrigation ponds on the farm. A shelter with picnic tables is also available by this pond. Special activities are also planned for the children during Halloween season. "Children are our best salespeople because when the kids are having fun, the parents enjoy themselves, too," says Joe.

Complementing Enterprises

According to Joe, the restaurant has been successful because it features the farm's fresh, high quality fruits and vegetables. "Serving real, wholesome food is what makes this restaurant go, and what we feature in the restaurant seems to sell really well in our farm market sales room," he says. "These two enterprises complement each other."

To supply their pick-your-own trade plus the farm market and restaurant, the Hubers farm about 360 acres, raising nearly 48 different types of fruits and vegetables, such as strawberries, raspberries, thornless blackberries, sweet corn, asparagus, green beans, broccoli, cauliflower, pumpkins, lima beans, peppers (sweet and hot), cabbage, cantaloupe, squash, turnip greens, okra, snow peas, Chinese cabbage, grapes and 12 different varieties of apples produced from semi-dwarf trees, to mention a few. This is a dramatic change from 1967 when Joe and Bonnie were raising seven different fruits and vegetables on their 80-acre farm and were working hard to make the switch from wholesale to direct marketing.

With the exception of sweet corn, potatoes and asparagus, all the produce is available on a pick-your-own basis. The produce is also available in bulk or as prepackaged in the farm market sales room.



The restaurant, which can seat 270 people, always features country-style fried chicken, homegrown vegetables, dumplings and fried biscuits with homemade apple butter. It has also received good reviews from food critics at local newspapers.

"You need the variety and quality to make it attractive and economical for the customers to drive out to the farm," says Joe. "Although our sales are higher than they've ever been, Bonnie and I have noticed an overall decline in pick-your-own sales since 1981. Then, we were selling about 90% of our crops as pick-your-own with the remaining being sold as prepicked. Today, we sell 70% of our crops as prepicked and 30% as pick-your-own. The market has really changed mainly because the customer is more affluent and because many women are now working and don't have the time to pick it themselves, but they still want high quality, nutritious produce for their families. Consequently, we've geared our farm market sales room to cater to the customers' demand for convenience and variety"

For example, the Hubers offer produce in different sized packages. Apples are available in half pecks. Potatoes are available by the half bushel. Sweet corn is sold by the half dozen. Peas are sold in three-pound packs, and for those who pick their own peas, they can have them shelled right on the spot for 5 cents per pound. The Hubers also cater to those who like to can and freeze produce. Bonnie frequently



A large variety of high quality fruits and vegetables is what attracts customers to Hubers' farm market sales room, which is located near their restaurant. The sales room and restaurant are open from March through December. Many other items are also offered such as jellies,



Some 60,000 people visit the Hubers' farm each year, and many are treated to country music and other family entertainment activities.

But the biggest reward that Joe and Bonnie have received from years of hard work and from starting the restaurant is knowing that their sons and daughters and in-laws were able to work into the business and keep the farm in the family without any debt hanging over anyone's head.

visits with customers, handing out brochures which offer canning and freezing tips along with her favorite recipes for preparing tasty meals and desserts. "This is the kind of personal touch that a customer can't get at a supermarket," says Joe. "Our family works hard at satisfying the customer, and it's our top priority to provide them the best, wholesome produce possible."

The Huber family is also very committed to working cooperatively with other local roadside marketers. During the mid-1970s, Joe and Bonnie formed a cooperative known as Starlight U-Pick Farms along with Joe's cousins, Gerald and Carl, who own and manage the Huber Winery and Orchard, and with Stumler's Orchard. Each year, the group gets together to discuss prices and a budget for advertising Starlight U-Pick Farms. Some harvesting equipment is even owned and used cooperatively by the group. "We all benefit by cooperating instead of trying to compete with each other," says Joe.

Joe III is fully managing the farm, and his wife, Kathy, handles the bookkeeping for the restaurant and farm. Louie manages the kitchen, and his wife, Katie, manages the dining room in the restaurant. Beverly manages the farm market sales room. Beverly's husband, Kenny, and sister, Kim, work part-time at the farm market. Chuck manages the packing shed for the farm market sales room and restaurant, and his wife, Tracey, is a hostess in the restaurant.

"I love the customers, and I'm just so thrilled to see the family actively involved with the business," says Bonnie. "When Joe and I were younger, we planned on building something for our children so that they could enjoy life a little more. For us, putting in those long, hard hours was well worth it."

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FROM:

Direct Farm Marketing and Tourism Handbook. Article and photos were excerpted with permission from the Winter 1987 issue of the **Rural Enterprise** magazine. The magazine temporarily suspended publication with the Summer 1992 issue.

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