

SUCCESS

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Stories

restaurant's employees have been as loyal over the years as its customers.

"You have to have good help to be successful," Mike says. "Some of our managers who are now in their forties and fifties started working for us when they were in high school."

The restaurant was so popular in the area that Bud's opened a second store in 1976. Two more stores followed in the early 1980s, and by the mid-1990s the family-owned chain had grown to seven units.

The seven restaurants average about 3,000 sq. ft., with dining rooms that seat around 55 customers. All the stores have drive-through windows, and take-out business still accounts for two-thirds of Bud's sales. Most stores serve about 850 meals a day between 10:30 a.m. and 9:00 p.m., and checks average around \$12-\$15.

While fried chicken, fried shrimp and fried fish fillets still constitute the bulk of the chain's sales, the menu also offers scallops, clam strips, barbecue ribs and pork, and a variety of sides, including crinkle-cut french fries, beans, corn fritters, mac and cheese, macaroni salad and potato salad along with coleslaw. Specials have included calamari, crab cakes, oyster and different combo plates.

The family has tweaked the menu over the years to accommodate its customers. "We added chicken tenders



Sometimes in the foodservice industry we lose sight of the fact that the business is not always about the latest menu trend or marketing gimmick or fashionable décor. More often it represents a job, and a restaurant a means of providing for your family.

In 1957, Bud Brinkman opened Bud's Chicken, a 1,000 sq. ft. take-out restaurant in Boynton Beach, Fla., essentially to do just that—provide for a growing family.

"He started the restaurant to take care of eight kids, four boys and four girls," says Michael Brinkman.

Today, the four brothers—Mike, Mark, Tom and Tim—oversee the operation of seven Bud's Chicken & Seafood restaurants in Palm Beach County. Despite the growth, not all that much has changed in the 50-plus years since the first unit opened.

"There's no magic to it," Mike Brinkman says. "You get up every day, put your shoes on and go to work."

The four brothers divide up whatever work has to be done without worrying about fancy titles. "Some days we all wear a lot of hats," says Mark Brinkman, "and others we all wear the same one. Whatever has to be done gets done."

The original take-out restaurant featured a varied menu, but soon specialized in southern-style fried chicken, fried shrimp and barbecued ribs. It catered to the lunch and dinner crowd. Over the years, Bud's experimented with new menu items and even ventured into breakfast at one point. But the restaurant kept coming back to its roots.

The restaurant expanded, adding indoor seating, and Bud's found its niche, offering fried chicken and seafood, ribs, homemade coleslaw, garden salads and more in a relaxed, family-friendly atmosphere.

Tragically, Bud's founder died in 1969, when oldest son Mike Brinkman was still in his teens. But Mike had been going to work at the restaurant with his dad every day after school and was able to step in and help keep the family business running. Fortunately, the



Pictured left to right: Jim Wick, Keating of Chicago, Inc.; Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago, Inc.; Mark Brinkman, Owner - Bud's Chicken & Seafood; Eliza Ann Keating, Keating of Chicago, Inc.; Jeff Kinni, Keating of Chicago. All Bud's Chicken & Seafood locations exclusively use Keating fryers, and none else.

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about 15 years ago,” says Mark Brinkman. “They’re popular, and because they’re boneless they’re easier to eat in the car.” Ten years ago, they added Buffalo chicken wings to the menu, too.

There’s no secret to the popularity of the chain’s food, either—no special herbs and spices or centuries-old family recipes. “Quality ingredients make a quality product,” Mark Brinkman says. “We’ve been fortunate enough to be able to get pretty much the same ingredients and make the same food since we opened.”

The biggest challenge Bud’s faces, the Brinkmans say, is the rising cost of commodities. “When the price of commodities like flour goes through the roof,” Mark says, “there’s always the temptation to use lower quality ingredients and raise menu prices. We have to resist that temptation if we’re going to keep our customers.”

Bud’s uses fresh, ice-packed Grade A chicken, mild cod fillets and two sizes of shrimp. All items are hand-breaded, and all seafood items are cooked to order. Chicken is batch-cooked and held under heat lamps for a short time while



An efficient and reliable line-up of Keating fryers at Bud’s Chicken & Seafood, some of which still run after 25 years!

orders are filled.

“I know that I can hold chicken for 20 minutes without any change in quality,” Mark says. “You can’t do that with seafood, so we cook to order.”

Now that the family has seven stores, they use a 2,500 sq. ft. central commissary to prepare some menu items. Most sides such as coleslaw, macaroni and potato salad, and baked beans, as well as cocktail, tartar and barbecue sauces are prepared there. The commissary also has a smoker to prepare ribs and barbecue pork.

Just about everything else is prepared on site, almost all of it in fryers. Beans are heated in a convection oven and ribs are reheated in a microwave. But chicken, seafood, fries and fritters are all cooked in a bank of fryers. Most stores have five to seven 14-in. fryers for seafood and fries and a bank of three or four 18-in. fryers for chicken.

The equipment has to produce and be reliable. The seven restaurants go through 15,000 lbs. of chicken, 15,000 lbs. of fried, 3,000 lbs. of fish and 2,500 lbs. of shrimp every week.

“We’ve used Keating fryers since the beginning,” Mike Brinkman says. “They’re simple to use, they work, and they’re easy to service.”

Over the years, the family has tried fryers made by other manufacturers, but uses Keating exclusively now. “In 1985, we opened a new unit and tried all new fryers,” Mark says, “but we just weren’t happy. They had very slow recovery time and some other problems as well. Keating fryers are very reliable and easy to service. We have several that are 25 years old.”

To the Brinkmans, running restaurants isn’t a glamorous job. It’s a way to provide for their families, which is the essence of why Bud’s Chicken & Seafood was founded in the first place. Hard work, quality product and loyal employees have helped



Bud’s Chicken chef, Chris Mattingly, cooks up a crispy batch of chicken tenders in one of their many Keating fryers.

them maintain a thriving family business. Their Keating fryers may not be glamorous, either, but they work just as hard as anyone in the family at getting the job done, too.



Michael W. Sherer writes frequently about food and the foodservice industry.



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