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Stories



Cruising down Perry Highway, a rumbling stomach steers the car toward the Pines Plaza Shopping Center. Maybe it's the egg-yolk-yellow lettering outside, or happy families bouncing in booths beyond the windows that beckon you in. There's nothing fancy here—just friendly faces and that familiar scent of home cookin'.

Sandwiched between a Shop and Save and a Citizen's Bank, Kelly O's Diner serves up plate after plate of polenta, pot roast and piping-hot pies—"just like mom's." And "mom" is Pittsburgh native Kelly O'Connor.

Kelly O grew up around the kitchen. The fourth child from a family of six, she was the youngest when her grandmother moved in with the family. Like a true Italian, Grams always had something cooking. The scents and flavors of stuffed peppers, spaghetti, homemade ravioli and grilled polenta wafted through Kelly's childhood, and at age 14, she took her first job with a catering company in Warrendale, north of Pittsburgh.

"I just liked talking to strangers, saying hello," she says. From there, she waitressed her way through

multiple local restaurants. Some gigs she loved—peeling thousands of shrimp in a weekend shift as an assembler at Red Lobster. And some she hated—donning the required ankle-length checkered dress as a waitress at Bob Evan's.

At first, she stayed in the Pittsburgh area, but once Kelly married her husband, his schedule required them to travel, first to Buena Vista, Fla. and then to Louisville, Ky. In each new place, Kelly's food service training coupled with her warm, easygoing personality made it easy to find a job.

Tragedy struck when her husband died suddenly in 1998, and she packed up and moved with her young daughter, Seana, 10, and son, Damon, 2, back home to Pittsburgh, where she picked up shifts as a bartender at a local pub. A few years later, in 2000, she started frequenting a grocery store owned by a friend in Ross Township, and the diner next door caught her eye.

The diner was originally the village dairy, an Isley's Ice Cream competitor, and when it was converted to a diner, burgers sold for 20 cents and eggs and toast for 10.

One afternoon in 2001, Kelly saddled up to a booth with a turkey bacon club, and on her way out, she asked the girl at the cash register if the place was for sale. The cashier, who happened to be the owner's daughter, less-than-politely informed her that it was not. Kelly left her name and number, just in case. The owner called her the next day. Due to illness in the family, she was quietly looking to sell.

For a month, Kelly "cased" the place, sitting in her car in the parking lot after taking her son to daycare, to see what the traffic was like. And, to pray.

After refinancing her house, Kelly took over the place on October 30, 2001. "It was like jumping off a cliff," she says. "God told me to do it, so I did it."

Even when things seemingly fall into place, they're not without their challenges. The shotgun diner had a 3 x 2 ft griddle sitting out in the middle of the dining room, with a hood no bigger than Kelly's arm spread. In 2002, she moved the griddle back to the kitchen and bought a bigger hood to properly ventilate the space.

Kelly also did a big remodel in 2008—from the pipes to the walls to the equipment. For starters, four layers of asbestos had taken up



Pictured left to right: Kelly's mom, Tootie; Kelly O'Connor, Kelly O's Diner; Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago; Kelly's daughter, Seana; Eliza Ann Keating, Keating of Chicago.

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residence in the walls and needed to be removed. A '50s feel is one thing, but equipment from the '50s is quite another. Everything from the sundae cooler to the soda fountain couldn't keep up with the pace and had to be replaced. She laid 1,500 square feet of checkered black and white tile herself, and new stools and diamond plates were put in—but the tomato-red '50s booths stayed.

Kelly also kept the same menu that's graced the tables for more than 50 years—but she put her own twist on it. She added breakfast staples like blueberry pancakes, breakfast burritos, and the Outrageous, a delectable scrambled egg sandwich on grilled Italian bread. She also added Eggs Benedict—a dish she used to make for Seana and Damon every Christmas morning.

She visited a family friend in North Carolina, and shortly thereafter, redeye biscuits and gravy showed up on the menu. But it's the dishes inspired by her family that have made her famous—the polenta with Bolognese her grandmother used to whip up for the kids at home, and



Kelly in her Diner's kitchen cooking on her Miracle[®] Griddle.

the turkey pot pie soup inspired by her grandmother's turkey noodle soup. "She'd always say, you can't just throw these turkey bones away!" Kelly says. As if the soup weren't decadent enough, Kelly tosses in pieces of her mom Tootie's homemade pie crust. "My mother is a pie-making queen," she says.

Her grandmother would be proud—the diner is the heart of the family. Pop in for breakfast, and you may get seated by Kelly herself while her mom starts the day's pies out back. Or, sit down to a steaming plate of haluski that Kelly likely prepared herself. Seana, now 22, is the manager there, and Damon, 14, picks up shifts. Kelly even brings in her mastiff, Bruno, on occasion.

And it's Gram's haluski—a Pittsburgh staple with polish origins—that humbled the rough-and-tough culinary personality Guy Fieri on The Food Network's "Diners, Dive-ins and Drives," the ultimate homage to greasy spoons.

When Fieri first rolled in off of Perry Highway in May 2008 (luckily just months after the remodel), he crooked his head at the thought of the hearty cabbage and egg noodle dish. But after tasting it, he liked it so much that he included the recipe in his book, "More Diners, Drive-ins and Dives: A Drop-Top Culinary Cruise through America's Finest and Funkiest Joints." "It was one of my surprise dishes on 'Triple Ds,'" he said on the show.

Once the show aired, the game changed for Kelly O's. Customers from all over the country started piling into the unassuming diner. With

three to four turnovers of her 100 seats each service, her equipment couldn't keep up—she knew she needed a new griddle.

She had first purchased a Star 4 x 2 ft griddle, but after the show, she outgrew its capabilities. She replaced it with a Keating of Chicago Miracle[®] chrome-plated griddle. Thanks to Keating's size flexibility and custom configurations, Kelly was able



Kelly O's grilled polenta and bacon.

to get a griddle that perfectly fits her space. It's become her lifeline.

French toast, pancakes and eggs all cook harmoniously on the 5 x 3 ft surface. (Kelly, at 5 feet, can barely even reach the back.) Her cooks make a 10 lb case of bacon in a half hour—something that used to take an hour and fifteen minutes. On the weekends, it takes three cooks at a time on the griddle to turn out plates fast enough for hungry customers. And the chrome surface is much easier to clean—a lifesaver when tickets endlessly roll in. (The Star Griddle now sits on a trailer out back.)

Kelly used to make the cabbage and onions for her famous haluski in a roasting pan on the stove, but now, it's all done on the griddle, thanks to its efficient heating system. Heat is maintained in the griddle plate, so you can cook at lower temperatures, faster and control the caramelization of the cabbage and onions.

The new equipment was installed at just the right time. If the show has just aired, she can go through a 50 lb bag of cabbage and onions in a matter of days.

"My story just intrigued enough people," she says humbly. "It's not been an easy road, but everything happens for a reason," she says. "I'm a successful business owner and I'm a successful mother, and that means more to me than anything."

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