

# SUCCESS

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## Stories



### Lions Tap

Think burgers and there's bound to be a place near you that pops into mind. A place where the burgers are juicy and tasty, the ambiance is fun and funky, and the service is, well, pretty much what you'd expect.

Lots of restaurants across the country serve hamburgers—there aren't many that don't—but even in big cities only a handful rise to the top. Atlanta has The Vortex Bar & Grill and The Varsity, and Seattle has Red Mill Burgers. The place to go for burgers in Boston is Mr. Bartley's Burger Cottage, which actually is in Cambridge. In Pittsburgh, it's Tessaro's, and in Chicago, the Billy Goat Tavern. People in L.A. drive out to The Counter in Santa Monica for great burgers.

For the best burgers in the Twin Cities, people have been going to the Lions Tap Family Restaurant in Eden Prairie, Minn., since 1977. That's when owners Bert and Bonnie Notermann bought a little roadhouse in the Minnesota River Valley and brought in their own recipe for quarter-pound hamburger patties.

Lions Tap first got its start as a roadside vegetable stand in the 1930s. The couple who managed the stand started pouring beer, and the place gradually

turned into a friendly neighborhood tavern. The operation changed ownership several times over the years, ending up in the hands of Irene and Sears Lyons in 1958. The couple renamed it "Lyons Tap" and introduced 25-cent burgers and draft beer for a nickel a glass. The Lyons sold the business in 1974, and it went through a few owners in quick succession.

Bert and Bonnie bought the Tri-Y drive-in restaurant in the early 70's as a sideline business to earn extra income for the family. They liked the restaurant business so much that when the Lyons Tap came on the market again in 1977, they bought it.

The Notermanns added their own spin to the restaurant's burgers as well as its name, and within three years undertook their first renovation to add seating for 40 more customers, a new walk-in and new cooking equipment. By 1984, business had already outgrown the expansion, and the Notermanns made plans for a complete renovation.

Finished in 1985, the project expanded the restaurant by another 80 seats and added a new kitchen and 40-car parking lot.

"It was a little ma-and-pa operation when we bought it and added on to it," says Bert Notermann. Now it's a big ma-and-pa operation. The restaurant seats 210 people, and serves between 8,000 and 10,000 customers in a typical week. In addition to owners Bert and Bonnie, the couple's son Matthew is a manager, and their daughter Allison helps out with office duties in her spare time. "It's still a family affair and still fun," Bert says.

The family includes Lions Tap's 50-plus employees. A few have been with the Notermanns for over 25 years, and many have worked at the restaurant for 10 or 15 years. The Notermanns say the secret to keeping so many long-time employees is treating them the way they'd like to be treated.

"Faith, family and fun are my priorities in life," Notermann says. "That's why I work, and fortunately work is fun. But family and life outside work are important to me, and I feel they're important to our employees, too."

The extended family helps the community, too. Lions Tap supports a variety of local causes from youth athletics to area churches, hospitals, and Special Olympics. The Notermanns estimate they've been involved with hundreds of charitable causes over the years, and give about \$150,000 a year back to the community.



*Pictured left to right:  
Eliza Ann Keating, Keating of Chicago, Inc.;  
Tim Preiner, Hollander Company;  
Bert Notermann, Owner, Lions Tap;  
Bonnie Notermann, Owner, Lions Tap;  
Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago, Inc.*

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While the Notermanns have changed and expanded the restaurant several times, they've done little to change the menu. Lions Tap does essentially one thing, and one thing well—hamburgers. Even variations on theme are limited. Choices are a basic burger, cheeseburger, California burger with or without cheese, a bacon cheeseburger, and a mushroom and Swiss cheese burger. Made with fresh mushrooms and good Swiss cheese, the latter item is the only menu addition in the last 25 years, and they thought long and hard before adding it.

Sides consist of fries or chips. Beverages are fairly limited, too. The restaurant serves fountain pops, milk, cans of soda, draft root beer, tap beer, and a few other “specialty beverages”. And while Lions Tap sells a lot of beer, the 10 to 12 kegs of root beer it pours every week is more than any brand of



*Lions Tap kitchen is equipped with three Keating® Miraclean® Griddles and two Instant Recovery® Fryers which handles 25 to 30 burgers per griddle and 28 orders of fries during peak mealtimes.*

beer it sells. The only other thing to decide is how hungry you are because you can double any burger, making it a half-pounder

Not even McDonald's was content to stick to just burgers, but the formula works for Lions Tap. “If people start having too many menu items,” Notermann says, “they lose sight of what they do best.”

The Notermanns secret burger recipe isn't the only reason it was voted “Best Burger” by Mpls.StPaul magazine every year but one from 1992 through 2005.

(Lions Tap was still a respectable #3 in the 2007 readers' poll.) It's a combination of quality ingredients, service and price, the couple says.

“We leave no stone unturned when it comes to giving customers the best,” Notermann says.

Burgers are topped with fresh produce. High quality buns are gently toasted on the griddle before sandwiches are assembled and served. Lions Tap uses a premium Lamb-Wesson frozen French fry for consistency, and cooks them in trans fat-free oil that's filtered often and changed weekly.

That emphasis on quality extends beyond food. As part of its kitchen renovations and expansions, Lions Tap selected Keating of Chicago equipment. The restaurant now has three Keating Miraclean griddles and two large Keating electric fryers. During peak mealtimes, the restaurant cooks 25-30 burgers per grill every five or six minutes and puts out 28 orders of fries every three to four minutes.

“When it comes to Keating,” Notermann says, “they don't compromise on inferior product. We've cooked millions of burgers on Keating griddles. They have a great reputation and stand behind their reputation and their products. And they're always open to suggestions on how to make their products better.”



*The Mushroom and Swiss Chesse Burger is one of the most popular items in the Lions Tap's menu.*

Notermann likes Keating fryers because of their quick recovery time, and one of the reasons he likes the Miraclean griddles is because they're easy to clean.

“We pay someone to clean full-time, but my motto is ‘if you got time to lean, you got time to clean,’ so all our employees help keep the kitchen clean.”

That attitude has won Lions Tap accolades for more than the Twin Cities' best burgers. County health inspectors have rated the restaurant number-one when it comes to sanitation and regularly tell other restaurants how Lions Tap always makes the grade.

If you're ever in the Twin Cities and want a good burger, now you know where to go.

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



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