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Stories



Back in the days when Popeyes Famous Fried Chicken was a fledgling chicken chain, Leon Fanning was busy making a living as an accountant. A numbers man, he kept track of the ascent of Louisiana-based Popeyes, and its quick growth prompted Fanning to run some numbers on a brand-new career.

"I saw figures on the restaurant industry and decided to give it a try myself," says Fanning.

So 28 years ago, Fanning packed up his spreadsheets and opened a fried-chicken restaurant. Since then, that

single restaurant has evolved into Shreveport, La.-based Southern Classic Chicken, a 12-unit chain owned and operated by Fanning, his wife, Avon, and their three sons, Brandon, Mitchell and Alex.

As the restaurant's name suggests, chicken, fried in a crisp, highly seasoned batter, is the star of Southern Classic's menu. "We only do one thing, and we do it the best we can," says Fanning.

The restaurants, located in Louisiana and Texas, offer take-out and dine-in service to a cadre of loyal customers. Each restaurant serves about 1,000 pounds of chicken a day, much of it via a popular two-piece combo that comes with fries and a beverage. At \$3, "it's too cheap," Fanning jokingly says of the meal deal. Spicy Cajun rice, fries, mashed potatoes,

coleslaw and apple pie round out the limited menu.

A well-focused menu usually means a well-focused kitchen, and that's certainly the case at Southern Classic. Each kitchen averages about 500 square feet, and the main cooking equipment is a bank of seven Keating IFM (Incredible Frying Machine) fryers. "Since we don't grill or anything, we don't have any other cooking equipment. All we do is fry," says Fanning, adding that storage, sinks, prep tables and refrigeration are part of the tidy equipment package.

Fanning has been a Keating customer since he opened his first restaurant so many years ago, and for a very practical reason. "When we first started, we looked at other fryers, and they weren't built for such large quantities of chicken," Fanning explains. "They didn't have the capacity we needed, and that's why we went with Keating. The other fryers weren't deep enough."

Five years ago, Fanning equipped all of his restaurants with Incredible Frying Machines. Like the Keating fryers before them, the IFMs boast three features that a fried-chicken specialty restaurant absolutely must have to keep customers happy. The first is deep, large-capacity frying



Left to right: Eliza Ann Keating; Leon Fanning; Avon Fanning; Mark Steffan, Steffan & Associates; Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago

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wells and baskets, crucial for a high-volume operation like Southern Classic Chicken.

The second is an Instant Recovery system that returns the cooking oil to optimal temperature after cold product has been dropped in the frying well. Instant Recovery is key to producing batch after batch of crisp, golden, consistently high quality fried foods. It's especially important for dense foods, such as chicken.

The third feature is the Cold Zone. During the cooking process, fried chicken sheds pieces of batter into the cooking oil. If they remain in the oil, the shards of batter continue cooking until they turn into fragments of carbon, a situation that quickly degrades the frying oil. Cold Zone traps those fragments of batter in a

compartment that's 100F cooler than the frying zone. Trapped in the Cold Zone, the particles stop cooking, and as a result, the frying oil lasts longer.

"The Cold Zone saves the life of the shortening," says Fanning. "We like that feature."

There's a fourth feature that keeps Fanning a Keating customer, and that's the slim utility bills he's been receiving since installing the Incredible Frying Machines. "We checked utility bills when we first installed the fryers five years ago. We realized a 50 percent savings in overall utilities, both gas and electric," Fanning explains.

Fanning explains that the fryers did such a good job of using energy efficiently and cutting down on ambient kitchen heat that, thanks to the savings on utilities, they paid for themselves in a year's time.

Money-saving fryers free up capital for Fanning to do what he wants: expand the Southern Classic Chicken empire. The chain historically has expanded slowly, at the rate of one unit a year, a pace that Fanning is comfortable with. This past spring, he celebrated a restaurateur's landmark: the opening of his 30th restaurant, in Tyler, Texas.

Fanning credits his success to several factors. One is that his wife and sons work in the business with him. "I've enlisted all the help I can," says Fanning, adding that at this point in the chain's life his sons, who own and operate restaurants, are more involved in the business than he is.

Brandon, Fanning's firstborn, has spent his entire career in the restaurants, Fanning reports. "He was 12 when we opened our first restaurant, and he was very much involved," Fanning says. "He's been in the business his whole life."

Fanning also says that choosing Keating fryers when he opened his first restaurant has helped Southern Classic Chicken compete favorably with national chains. "Along the way, we've taken off menu items and added them," he explains. "We do the best with a limited menu, and Keating lets us do the best that we can."

All in all, fried chicken has been a rewarding career for the former accountant. "The fact that we've been in business and stayed in business, and the family has been able to come into the business, is the most rewarding thing to me," Fanning says.



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Saving 50% in overall utilities make both Leon and Avon Fanning happy with Keating's IFM fryer.