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Stories



When Chicago-area residents crave a good, old-fashioned chicken dinner, there's nothing else to do but hop in the car and motor to the White Fence Farm.

White Fence Farm, a 1,100-seat family restaurant located in Lemont, IL, has specialized in fried chicken since its founding in 1954. The house specialty is Farm Chicken, a half-chicken (four pieces) priced at \$10.95 per person.

On average, White Fence Farm serves 4,600 Farm Chicken dinners per day, amounting to roughly 6,500 pounds of chicken. Over Mother's Day weekend, its busiest time of year, the Farm sells more than 16,000 chicken dinners via its 12 dining rooms and carryout location, plus five satellite carryout locations in Joliet, Downers Grove, Plainfield, Romeoville and Riverside, IL. Amazingly, all this business is done at dinner only; the Farm doesn't serve lunch.

Customers who love fried food have a choice of more than chicken at the

*Eliza Ann Keating, Keating of Chicago;
Laura Hastert-Gardner, White Fence Farm;
Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago*

White Fence Farm. Fried Shrimp (\$11.45) and Crispy Golden Icelandic Cod (\$12.45) round out the fried-food dinner selections. French fries and World Famous Corn Fritters accompany each dinner, along with bean salad, coleslaw, pickled beets and cottage cheese. In other words, White Fence Farm customers don't leave the table hungry.

To handle such vast volume of fried food, White Fence Farm relies on Keating fryers. "We need good, durable fryers to put out that kind of business," says Laura Hastert-Gardner, granddaughter of White Fence Farm founders Robert and Doris Hastert. The restaurant's main kitchen boasts twelve 18-inch Keating fryers, a 24-inch model and a 34x24-

model, all lined up in a row. Each carryout location is equipped with seven 18-inch models and one 24-inch model, which is used to prepare the corn fritters.

White Fence Farm has depended on Keating fryers its entire 51-year history. In fact, Laura Hastert-Gardner sees similarities between her family's restaurant and Keating. "As an owner, the fact that the Keating family is still involved and stands behind their product is reassuring," she says. "I like to see other family businesses still around after so many years. You don't see that much anymore."

"We're the same family owners and the same good food at the same location," Laura Hastert-Gardner continues. "We have that in common with the Keating family: a good product keeps the family in business."

Even more important to Laura Hastert-Gardner is the fryers' durability and capability. She doesn't hesitate in listing what she loves about Keating fryers: "They're easy to use, easy to clean, reliable, are built heavy-duty and recover the best out of any other fryer." Fast recovery is key to producing the crisp, hot, chicken, fries and fish that keep White Fence Farm



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packed with customers.

On the rare occasions when White Fence Farm's in-house maintenance staff must attend to the fryers, "they are easy for any of our carryout managers to fix," Laura Hastert-Gardner says. The restaurant keeps the fryers in top working order by straining the oil every day and doing a full boil-out on each fryer every month, she explains.

Over the years White Fence Farm has experimented only once with another brand of fryers, but quickly returned to Keating: "We stay with a product when it works well," Laura Hastert-Gardner says.

Laura Hastert-Gardner's grandparents, Robert and Doris Hastert, founded the White Fence Farm in 1954. (Speaker of the House Dennis



Family owned for Four Generations- The Hastert Family, White Fence Farm & Keating Family, Keating of Chicago

Hastert, an Illinoisan, is the Hasterts' nephew.)

Bob Jr., the Hasterts' son, joined the business in the 1960s. These days Doris, Bob Jr., and Laura Hastert-Gardner, who is Bob Jr.'s daughter, run the business. In 1973, they helped another family set up a White Fence Farm in Lakewood, CO; that operation is known as Wilson's White Fence Farm.

In 1954, the original White Fence Farm seated 120 guests and sold its famous chicken dinner for \$1.95. While the menu still focuses on fried chicken and a handful of other dinner favorites, the facility has changed considerably in the last 50 years. It has grown to encompass 75,000 square feet, seats more than twice its original capacity, employs 180 people and boasts a 567-car parking lot. Its 12 acres, once part of a working farm, include a petting zoo with three llamas, three sheep, chickens and four miniature African Pygmy goats; a museum showcasing antique cars and clocks; and kid-friendly rides and games.

The Farm accommodates bridal showers and other private parties in its Harvest Rooms. A special banquet

menu, tailored for groups of 25 or more, offers chicken, fried shrimp, broiled white fish and ribeye steak, plus the customary side dishes and vanilla ice cream for dessert.

White Fence Farm gives its workers (and fryers) a break by closing every Monday, and



Hugh Moarn, Kitchen Manager- 29 years of service at White Fence Farm

on Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day - times when its core customers are enjoying home-cooked dinners with their families.

On every other day of the year, it's a busy restaurant that offers customers not just a hearty meal, but a mini family getaway. White Fence Farm does more than its fair share to promote that family feeling: Doris Hastert greets her customers every day, and Bob Jr., following in his father's footsteps, makes the rounds of tables, remembering every face if not every name.

And in the back of the house, the mechanical members of the Hastert family, those Keating fryers, bubble and boil away, turning out mounds of golden-crisp, juicy chicken. The fryers are essential to the Farm's success, says Laura Hastert-Gardner: "They help us sell a lot of chicken."

Philip Nicolai writes frequently about the restaurant business.



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