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Stories



Pass one of Savannah's six Carey Hilliard's restaurants on a pleasant day and you're likely to see crowds of people enjoying lunch or dinner - not only inside, but seated in the comfort of their own cars enjoying Hilliard's famous curbside service.

That curbside service, plus a menu of hot, freshly fried seafood, has made Carey Hilliard's restaurants a favorite among Savannah residents for over 45 years. The restaurants' readerboards often proclaim "Come as you are and dine in your car," says Thom Richardson, who describes himself as a corporate assistant at Carey Hilliard's. "It may sound corny, but it's a feature unique to us, and to Savannah."

Carey Hilliard's has offered curbside service since 1960, when Carey Hilliard Sr. and his wife, Kathleen, took over a shuttered root beer stand on Skidaway Road in Savannah. Hilliard decided to

offer curbside service because the tiny black-and-orange restaurant held only 35 seats. To compensate for the lack of seats, employees delivered barbecue and other delights to diners in their cars. "At the beginning, we had more curbside than sit-down service," Richardson says. Today, curbside service accounts for about 30 percent of business.

While Hilliard's made its debut with curbside service, the menu of fried foods developed over time. The original menu offered barbecue sandwiches, Brunswick stew and fried shrimp. Hilliard slowly expanded menu offerings to include fried scallops, catfish and ocean flounder. It was then that the concept took off, enabling Hilliard to add extra locations throughout the 1970s.

"When he added fried fish and oysters, that's when the kite started flying high," says Frank Hutcheson, who handles purchasing for Carey Hilliard's restaurants.

Today, about 60% of Carey Hilliard's menu is fried, with menu choices including fried shrimp (\$8.99), fried ocean flounder (\$8.99), fried scallops (\$9.29), catfish (\$7.49) and oysters (\$8.99). Entrees are served with coleslaw or green beans and the diner's choice of potato, plus the deep-fried dough balls called hush puppies.

Popular add-ons include hand-cut, double-dipped onion rings (\$1.99 for a small and \$2.99 for a large), fries (\$1.49 small, \$1.99 large), hush puppies (\$1.69 small, \$2.39 large) and deep-fried hot wings (six for \$3.99, 12 for \$7.49).

Fried chicken (\$6.89), a barbecue platter (\$6), and St. Louis-style ribs (\$11.29 for a half-rack and \$15.29 for a full rack) round out the menu, as do a boiled shrimp salad (\$7.19) and a tuna plate (\$6.19) for lighter appetites.

Each store fries about 100 pounds of onion rings a day and 500 pounds of shrimp a week, and when hot wings are



*Eliza Ann Keating, Keating of Chicago;
Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago;
Thom Richardson, Carey Hilliard's Restaurants*

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on special (30 cents each), the stores sell half a million in 30 days, Hutcheson reports. All that frying - not to mention the fact that each Hilliard's is open from 11 a.m. to midnight daily - requires sturdy, dependable fryers, and that's why Carey Hilliard's uses, and has always used, Keating fryers.

The first restaurant had only one fryer, which Carey Hilliard Sr. used to make hand-cut "from-scratch" fries to accompany the barbecue sandwiches. Each of the restaurants open today is equipped with five TS 18 fryers; a separate banquet facility has two Keating fryers.

"Keating does the job for us," Hutcheson says. Carey Hilliard Sr. once experimented with two other brands of fryers, "but they just didn't hold up," Hutcheson says. "We tried



Keatings in one location and have been using them ever since." The chain recently bought 15 new Keating fryers, he adds.

The Keating fryers offer a quick recovery time and a Cold Zone feature, both crucial for golden, crisp, non-greasy fried food and quick ticket times. "When you serve over 3,000 people a day, and you do it quickly, you have to have a fryer you can depend upon," Richardson says, "we depend upon Keating." Kitchen staffers at each restaurant filter the oil two times a day to ensure optimal frying results. The Cold Zone feature helps keep the frying oil fresh as well.

"We take good care of them," Hutcheson says of the fryers. "They don't have time to take a breath." He adds that G. Timothy Hilliard, the company's CEO and one of Carey Hilliard Sr.'s three sons, is considering buying Keating fryers with automatic filters that do the job in five minutes. "That's where we might go next," Hutcheson says, explaining that the chain uses the banquet facility's kitchen as a test site.

Locals are the biggest consumers of Carey Hilliard's fried bounty, despite Savannah's reputation as a Mecca for food lovers, especially those who love Southern cuisine. "Most of it is repeat business," says Hutcheson. "We don't depend on tourists at all."

Visiting the restaurant is a family tradition, Richardson adds. "My daddy and mommy brought me here when I was a child, and now I bring my children here... that's a family tradition we enjoy keeping alive," he says. A children's menu helps keep the wee ones - and their parents - happy.

Frank Hutcheson, Purchasing Manager for Carey Hilliard's Restaurants



Thirty Five-Year employee Jo Ann Gary and Manager Hilda Denmark in the kitchen of Carey Hilliard's

Family is important, and that's why the Hilliard family stays loyal to Keating fryers. They're the product of a family business, just as fried seafood and hush puppies are trademarks of the Hilliard family business. "We've been in the same room with the Keatings for a long time," Hutcheson says. If anyone, even a would-be competitor, is curious as to what brand of equipment produces such impeccably fried seafood in such astounding volume, Hutcheson proudly tells them that Carey Hilliard's uses Keating fryers.

And the restaurants will continue to use Keating fryers as long as there are shrimp to fry and onion rings to bread. "If it's not broke, we're not going to fix it," Richardson says. "What we have works."

Chicago-based writer Philip Nicolai writes frequently about food and the restaurant business.



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