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Stories



You may never have heard of St. Clairsville, Ohio, but a lot of people from Maine to Hawaii have, for one simple reason: Mehlman Cafeteria. In an unassuming, almost nondescript, building a little ways off Interstate 70, this family-owned restaurant has been serving traditional home cooking for decades.

Over time its loyal fan base has spread, helping the business grow year after year. “Regulars” drive from as far as Columbus, Akron and Pittsburgh—all an hour or more away—at least once a month or so. Locals frequent the place several times a week. To keep up, the restaurant serves an average of about 12,000 meals a week. What accounts for this kind of popularity?

“We’re kind of unique anymore,” says Jay Mehlman, president. “We buy the best ingredients we can find regardless of the price, offer great value, serve consistent, good food and provide great service.”

Sounds simple, but there’s a lot more to Mehlman’s than that. It’s no white tablecloth restaurant, but it doesn’t pretend to be. Instead, people come

for home-cooked meals that few have time to make anymore. Foods like baked ham, roast pork and dressing, stuffed chicken breast, lasagna, chicken pot pie, Salisbury steak and prime rib. And hard-to-find specialties like cabbage rolls, stuffed green peppers, kielbasa and sauerkraut, even liver and onions.

“We make everything fresh every day,” Mehlman says, “from rolls to pie shells and meringue.”

What Mehlman Cafeteria has in spades is real, honest-to-goodness cafeteria food. Comfort food. The kind that some of the biggest and best names in the business once made for their clientele across the country—barbecued babyback ribs, macaroni and cheese, tuna noodle casserole, creamed chicken on biscuits, and don’t forget desserts, from pies to Jell-O. The kind that

RoadFood.com has deemed one of its “top picks.”

The restaurant’s staff of 100 starts to trickle in by 4 a.m. to mix dough for bread, rolls and pies. Each day, the kitchen bakes off about 40 dozen rolls, and bread is often mixed in 50-loaf batches. Cooks crack more than 360 dozen eggs each week (and the restaurant doesn’t even serve breakfast!), using yolks in freshly prepared noodles, sauces and other recipes, and the whites for pie meringue.

Since all its gravies are made from scratch using stock prepared in the kitchen, the restaurant goes through an average of 5,000 pounds of potatoes a week to pour them on. Not to mention all the other delicious entrees gravy accompanies so well. Fish still sells so well, in the form of fried or broiled Canadian whitefish and fish sandwiches, that the restaurant goes through about 500 pounds on a typical Friday.

Jay Mehlman is the third generation of the family to keep the restaurant’s traditions alive. Jay’s grandmother Mary founded the restaurant’s predecessor in 1961 in nearby Wheeling. Mary learned to cook as a teenager when she moved in with the Mehlman family in East Wheeling, where she met her future husband Fred. The farming family sold produce and poultry along with home-made dishes at a market in town.



Pictured left to right:
Eliza Ann Keating, Keating of Chicago;
Jay Mehlman, President, Mehlman Cafeteria;
Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago.

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After raising her own family with Fred, Mary opened a deli in the local YWCA. Their son Fred, Jr., and his wife Mary Jo went to work for her, and soon after the younger couple opened a cafeteria at the Catholic Women's League. Fans of the Mehlmans' home cooking grew.

Mary bought a small motel in 1966 in St. Clairsville and moved the cafeteria into the motel's coffee shop and diner. By 1984, business had grown to the point that the motel was torn down, and the restaurant expanded in its place to 350 seats.

Along with the expanded space, the menu has grown, too, over the years. But Mary's recipes are still used for all the original menu items. A few of the recipes have changed, but only because some purveyors no longer make the ingredients the recipes originally called for. Still, most items taste pretty much the way customers expect them to.

"Home-made food is definitely what draws people," Mehlman says. "Folks



Eliza Keating and Jay Mehlman in the kitchen of Mehlman Cafeteria.

remark that 'it's just like my aunt used to make,' or 'my grandma had a recipe like that.'"

The other key ingredient in the Mehlmans' recipes is care. The food tastes home-made because all the cooks prepare food the way they would at home.

"We're all self-taught here," Mehlman says. "I've been working here since I was 10, and I love it. I love to cook and bake. I think you have to love this business to be in it."

That home-cooked taste has translated into a booming take-out business, too. Carry-out meals account for about 18 percent of the restaurant's volume, and continue to grow about one or two percent each year.

Best-sellers on the menu are the prime rib, roast beef, whitefish, stuffed chicken breast, barbecued ribs and the breaded, baked pork chops. Mehlman Cafeteria sells about 800 pork chops a week.

The staff cooks food in batches of about 50 to 75 servings at a time. Menu items are put in pass-through warmers for line servers to pick up on the other side to serve to customers in a tray line. While the kitchen has a wide array of equipment to produce all those items, Mehlman says he counts on his Keating Miraclean® griddle.

Due to the volume of food the cafeteria puts out, it recently replaced most of the equipment in the kitchen, including stoves, ovens, warmers and more. One of the pieces replaced was a Keating griddle that had originally been installed in the 1970s.

"It still worked just fine," says Mehlman. "In fact, over the years the only things that needed fixing were a thermostat and a gas valve. But we were so excited to get a new one that the Keating griddle was the only piece of equipment I didn't put out for bid. It really helped the jazz up the appearance



Mehlman's famous pork chops.

of the kitchen, and we received a stimulus tax break for purchasing it."

Mehlman uses the griddle to sear a number of menu items before baking them off in an oven, including those famous pork chops, "city" chicken (dipped in egg wash and bread crumbs, browned on the griddle and baked), Swiss steak, Salisbury steak, and liver and onions.

What Mehlman and the staff love about the Keating griddle is how easy it is to keep clean. "We clean it after every batch of food we cook," he says, (especially important after cooking liver and onions), "and it always looks really beautiful."

The Miraclean® surface not only saves staff time and effort to keep clean, but prevents any flavor migration from one menu item to the next.

"It's my favorite piece of equipment," Mehlman says. "And what really impressed me is that Keating was the only manufacturer of all those we purchased equipment from that called after it was installed and asked us how it was working for us. That's a big deal for us that they took the time to call."

If you're ever crossing Ohio on I-70, be sure to make a stop at Mehlman Cafeteria. Home-style cooking doesn't get any better.

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



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