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Stories



There are few childhood memories more fond than waking up to breakfast. Pans frying and stomachs grumbling, the family filed in to the table in anticipation of buttery mountains of that perfect breakfast staple: pancakes.

Even with today's busy schedules and hectic lifestyles, there's still the simple desire to reminisce and share this treasured meal with friends and family. With these warm thoughts in mind, an opportunity was seized by John Dys, the founder of De Dutch Pannekoek House Restaurants, Inc., an expat from the Netherlands who brought a treasured recipe more than 3,000 miles to form roots in western Canada.

De Dutch got its start from John Dys, a logger in Canada who had emigrated from Holland in the 1950s. He got his start in the food business from admittedly humble beginnings. "I wasn't interested in the food business; I needed a job," he says.

After joining and serving in the Dutch army, Dys realized he wanted out, and immigrated to Halifax in 1955. He started off in his new country working "in the bush" until he was debilitated from a car accident. After he recovered, he needed to find work to pay the bills. The Delmar, a local fast food hamburger chain, was hiring.

British Columbia
Canada

Dys took a job cooking hamburgers for 65 cents an hour and soon developed a knack for the business. He worked his way up to general manager and continued climbing the ladder until he started The Frying Dutchman in 1970. But a trip back home in 1974 to celebrate his parents' 60th wedding anniversary changed his trajectory.

Back in Holland, Dys went with his father to a pannekoek house in an old farmhouse, a restaurant that features the traditional Dutch pancake—thicker than a crepe but thinner than a traditional pancake. As he savored the ham and cheese variety, he saw an opportunity in the Canadian market for a casual, comfortable restaurant featuring the native dish. A year later, he opened his first De Dutch Pannekoek House Restaurant on Knight Road in Vancouver—a tiny location down a tiny stairwell that quickly developed a loyal following.

The company played around with a few different concepts—a bakery arm, fancier coffee-shop-type setups, bigger waiting areas with couches—before arriving at the airier, larger design. "We don't want to crowd our customers in," Waring says. "People are looking for that family time." Dys also

wanted the atmosphere to be just as comforting as the food. The walls are splashed with a warm, creamy yellow with light blue complements. Pictures of windmills are hung throughout, and the windows are lined with flower boxes of tulips that add a pop of color. "It's the little elements that incorporate our heritage while giving the restaurants a contemporary feel," says Pamela Waring, who heads up marketing for De Dutch.

While the basic ingredients have stayed the same, the variety of pannekoeken has grown exponentially. "The Windmill" features shaved Wild British Columbia smoked salmon, imported Edam cheese and Hollandaise Sauce. The "Abby" pierogi version is stuffed with hash browns, bacon and onions and topped with cheddar cheese and sour cream. More than 50 pannekoeken have been featured, and franchises continue to come up with different recipes.

As Dys expanded his empire, he made sure to keep his trusted colleagues with him, and this included Bill Waring, now president of De Dutch. Waring first worked with Dys as a sales representative for a dairy supplier that did business with The Frying Dutchman. As their relationship grew and the restaurant chain expanded to include the pannekoek houses, an opportunity became available in 1979 to buy one of the chain locations.

"I was really looking into it for my par-



The Grand Opening at the De Dutch in Maple Ridge, BC - pictured left to right: Bill Waring, President of De Dutch, Mike Gemmel & Richard Dys, franchise owners, John Dys, original founder. In foreground: Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago and Eliza Ann Keating.

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ents, because my father had always talked about getting into running a business," he says. "But when he decided that he couldn't do it, it still looked like a great opportunity for me."

Waring took on the challenge, and he and Dys proved to be the perfect professional complement. Dys focused on the operational details while Waring focused on finance and marketing. Waring continued to earn Dys' trust and eventually became president of the company. De Dutch has since grown to 21 restaurants peppered throughout the lower mainland of British Columbia, four opening in just the past year.

With the newer restaurants housing 100 seats, demands on staff and equipment became greater, with four to six turns per table on a busy Sunday, and anywhere from three to eight people working in the kitchen. The need for more modern equipment was evident.

Back in 1975, to get the original location up and running, Dys invested \$40,000 total in equipment; now, restaurants cost closer to half a million each. Through personal experience and conversations with others in the food industry, Dys and Waring became familiar with Keating of Chicago. The desire to have quality Keating equipment installed was not a quick decision, but one that drove the company to meet even higher standards.



Keating's MIRACLEAN® Griddle is the perfect cooking surface to use for dishing up over 50 varieties of De Dutch's famous Pannekoeks.

"When I was working with The Frying Dutchman, one of the restaurants had Keating deep fryers for the French fries," Waring says. "They had faster recovery and they were easy to clean." But at two to three times more expensive than their existing equipment, an upgrade was out of reach at the time. "I lusted after having the Keating equipment in our restaurants and I set it as a goal."

As the De Dutch's financial portfolio grew, they were able to make the investment in quality machinery, and it paid off. They now have 25 Miraclean® Griddles throughout their restaurants. "These pieces of equipment have to survive through 20 to 30 years of operation," Waring says. "What it costs upfront is a pittance compared to

what it would cost to have to replace the equipment."

Waring also says that the Keating griddles are roughly 25 percent less expensive to operate than other manufacturers, and create for a more pleasant working environment for the operators. As the griddles radiate heat differently than conventional griddles, the workmen are less overheated.

The design of the machine also makes for a better product, especially when cooking eggs, a big seller for the chain.

"The surface temperature is more even, which facilitates a better product," Waring says. "The Keating griddles also have a shiny, clean surface. Other griddles have a dark metal surface and you can't get the grease off. It leaves dark spots that show up on the eggs."

If there is an issue with the Keating equipment, Waring and Dys know that



Pan_ne_koek, the genuine Dutch pancake, has a circumference of 37" & a diameter of 12". For the culinary foundation of the restaurant, Dys turned to his mother's pannekoek recipe. "Growing up, we lived in small villages and we never went to restaurants. All of the households in the Netherlands had their own recipes," he says. The secret to his mom's recipe: a combination of buckwheat and regular flour.

the problem will be solved quickly. "Keating is responsive. You can pick up the phone and talk to them," Waring says. "That's a really good relationship to have. You don't do business with companies; you do business with people."

Dys still lives a block away from the original De Dutch location, which he managed up until four years ago. The restaurant is one that's been kept in the "old style décor," and features a beer glass collection with more than 1,000 varieties from 63 countries—a longtime hobby of Dys'. He visits every day, helping out wherever he can. His namesake is a special on the menu—the "John Dys," with ham, mushrooms and spinach—but after conquering a triple bypass this year, he usually sticks to the lower-cholesterol options.

The chain is his legacy. "I have third-generation customers coming in here now, and I love that," he says. "I hope it will continue to grow."

Megan Downey is a freelance writer.



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