

BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

CDI: All about food, fun, family

Country Drive-In serves up nostalgia along with burgers and onion rings

By LAUREN CARPENTER
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Country Drive-In, off Exit 8, is the sure sign of spring to those in the know — just about all of Southern Saratoga County.

The iconic quick service outdoor eatery is a throwback for baby boomers who remember stopping with mom and dad for a milkshake and hamburger along a winding rural road long before golden arches appeared in the landscape or the term franchise was commonplace. It is unequivocally a favorite among residents of all ages and for travelers who, by happenstance, are lucky enough to drive by and stop for a fish fry or homemade onion rings with some nostalgia on the side.

Opened in 1969 with original owners Marie and Ellie Martin, this mainstay has remained true to its roots as the town around it flourished. The reins were handed over to owners who continued to improve upon the physical aspects of the building, including current co-owner Hugh Mairaca, who flew solo for nine years as owner.

One of Mairaca's faithful employees, current co-owner and manager Lena Riberdy, started like all 14-year olds do at their first job: at the bottom.

"I started in 1989 washing picnic tables and cleaning bathrooms," she remembers, "and I worked every summer there on out."

Riberdy continued working summers through high school and college and one day Mairaca questioned her about her long-term plan. "It was one of those crazy things," she says. He offered her a partnership.

"But I didn't want to ruin a good thing," she said.

She officially came on board as a co-owner in 2005.

As manager on duty working seven days a week in a season that lasts until the last Sunday in September, Riberdy makes it very clear that Country Drive-In, or CDI, is not a fast food restaurant. The town may have grown up all around CDI, but the menu still offers a selection of original favorite must-haves all made to order.

Menu items still on the board after 42 years include the CDI steak sandwich made with sliced sirloin, grilled hot-dogs and hamburgers (about 1,800 of these are ordered up weekly), and the haddock fish fry — one of the establishment's biggest sellers. "The haddock fish fry, and it has to haddock, is expensive at \$5.25, but customers want it. It's not a money-making item for us, but you don't change a good thing," Riberdy said.

Then there are the homemade onion rings. Riberdy praises the skills of her three "Onion Rings Girls" who make the batter daily with consistency right down to the temperature of the water.

"They have it down," she says proudly.

Other popular items include the grilled speidie chicken as a sandwich or on a tossed salad, CDI Burger, barbecue pork with cheese, the tradition-



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Lena Riberdy, co-owner and manager with Hugh Mairaca of the Country Drive-In at 1455 Vischer Ferry Road, Clifton Park, began as a summer part-timer, washing picnic tables and cleaning the bathrooms.

al BLT, tuna melts and even grilled crab cakes. And, of course, there are the french fries, always back by popular demand.

Full dinners are available, including scallops, shrimp and clam strips and cold sandwiches, including white tuna salad, grilled chicken salad and a crab salad with lettuce on a hotdog roll, white, rye or wheat.

Let's not forget the ice cream. Using only Upstate Dairy ice cream mix from Mohawk Dairy in Amsterdam, CDI offers root beer floats, banana splits and parfaits and a host of other warm weather favorites like sundaes, malts, and ice cream sodas with endless sprinkles, nuts and dips to choose from.

Chocolate and vanilla soft ice cream is always available and there is a different flavor of the week every Wednesday. Frozen yogurt and a non-fat-no-sugar-added ice cream are also pleasing palates. Two specialty desserts include the hot

fudge brownie delight made with brownies baked right on the premises and the strawberry shortcake sundae, which Riberdy calls a refreshing summertime favorite.

"Both are great date desserts. We see a lot of couples ordering these throughout the summer," she said.

CDI doesn't rest on its laurels and Riberdy doesn't do this alone. Along with Mairaca, the owners hire a staff of 60, yes, 60, to make it through the six months. Nine are full time and the rest are the young faithful, like Riberdy herself, who return every

summer to their CDI family.

Allowing Riberdy her one night off and some Sunday afternoons are her two assistants, whom she deems "wonderful." Both have been with her for at least 10 years.

Capital improvements continue with this season's new covered porch, which holds six or seven of the large outdoor picnic tables used by patrons throughout the season.

A lack of technology hasn't held back CDI's success, but Riberdy says a website is under construction.

Community involve-

ment is important to Riberdy and her staff. CDI has donated to many local organizations, including schools such as Okte Elementary School right down the road. This year's chair of Okte's ice cream social, Jeanne Kuhn, can't say enough about Riberdy and her outreach into the community.

"CDI has been donating to us for years. She gives us all the ice cream and toppings. Our ice cream social is a huge event that brings the community together. Lena complements the community beautifully," Kuhn said.

That's part of their role

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as a family place, Riberdy believes.

"If we can't help these organizations, how can they help us? I'm in favor of doing what we can — it's about what kids are getting out of it," Riberdy adds.

"Families are always coming in here. Kids love this place. Teenagers, too. We always know when there are half-days at school — they all show up at the same time.

"They have a good time here, it's outside, they have fun and they never get into any trouble.

"It's a great atmosphere."

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