

# A day in the life of **WAFFLE HOUSE**

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While it is true that the Waffle House never closes, it is not true, as some insist, that the keys to the front door are buried in wet cement each time a new unit opens. They might as well be. Waffle House doors stay unlocked 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. Somewhere, night and day, the hash browns are hissing.

"Christmas is rough," says waitress Shirley Lowe, as she stands behind a Waffle House counter in East Point, blinking through circles of blue eye shadow that make her face look as sad as a panda's. "I've got three small kids, and I want to be home watching them open gifts so bad. But that's our busiest day. We've got customers lined up waiting to get in, and they expect to see me here. They're family, too."

"Here comes Mr. Tibbs," another waitress announces. Dan Tibbs, the neighborhood laundryman, qualifies as kin because he has been visiting the restaurant as often as three times a day since 1978. His coffee is waiting by the time he walks in and hears the voices chiming, "Good morning!"

For 44 years, Waffle House has been almost as reliable as sunrise. Those yellow-and-black Scrabble-board signs have become such a familiar feature of the Southern landscape that they almost blend in, like pine trees or double-wides. There are 1,200 Waffle Houses across a Sun Belt crescent that begins in Maryland and ends in Arizona. Atlanta, the company's hometown, has more than 200 alone, making Waffle House and McDonald's the metro area's most franchised restaurants.

Despite their assembly-line sameness, the two chains differ considerably. Something about Waffle House invites an intimacy that would seem out of character beneath the Golden Arches. Maybe it's the shoe-box smallness of the buildings. Or the fact that so many customers are regulars who know their waitresses by name. Or the retro way orders are filled, not by computer screen, but by shouting, the food then cooked before your eyes. Maybe it's the diner lingo or the all-night ambience or the jukeboxes that stock corny songs about eating at the Waffle House.

Whatever it is, the chain has inspired a cult following that runs from cops and truck drivers to barflies and overcaffeinated college students. The latter are mostly responsible for the dozens of Waffle House Web sites, full of witty repartee such as this recent exchange:

*"I (bleepin') love the Waffle House."*

*"Wawful on, dude!"*

*"You idiots are sick, get a life!"*

Waffle House Inc. has no official Web site of its own. The privately held company has never really courted publicity --- until now. Late last year, for the first time, Waffle House hired an outside public relations firm. "We were seeing a lot of



stories about Chick-fil-A," explains marketing executive Chris Jacobsen, mentioning the other great Atlanta-based fast-food success, "and we thought we had a good a story to tell, too."

But unlike Chick-fil-A's talkative S. Truett Cathy, Waffle House's chief executive won't be telling it. Joe Rogers Jr. doesn't do interviews. The last time he talked to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution at any length, Richard Nixon was president. His Waffleness prefers that any media attention focus on the restaurants and their employees and customers.

That attitude inhabits Waffle House headquarters. The new two-story complex in Norcross has no private offices, only cubicles. Nor are there kitchen facilities; employees are encouraged to get out from behind their desks and eat at a Waffle House. On holidays, they're urged to show their solidarity with the front-line troops by volunteering to do anything from running the grill to washing dishes. When the suits return to HQ, they can't miss the sign over the elevators that demands to know, in the words of one of the company's founders, "Who's looking out for the poor old cash customer?"

Good question. This story is about them --- those poor old cash customers and the poor old cooks and waitresses who feed them and humor them in a thousand little boxes thick with smoke and grease and the clatter of people being people.

### **Breakfast side of the street**

It's 7 o'clock on a Friday morning, and the usual crowd is streaming in: the painter, the preacher, the contractor whose lady won't let him smoke at home, the guy whose hair looks suspiciously dark and shiny.

"Wayne, did you dye your hair?" waitress Amanda Jacobs asks.

"Naw," Wayne says, settling into a booth. "It's Just for Men."

Every Waffle House is assigned a number according to when it opened. Unit 7, on West Washington Road in East Point, is one of the oldest. It's an authentic classic, from the fake-brick floor to the faux-wooden booths to the brown laminate countertop --- a symphony of earth tones that was last fashionable when Barry White was popular the first time around. The open kitchen --- all stainless steel and sizzle --- has two griddles, two burners and six round waffle irons that gleam like chrome hubcaps.

To top it off, there's a historic personage at the door. "Miss Lucy" Shelton has been waiting tables in Atlanta for so long that she remembers pouring coffee for Margaret Mitchell. She's been working for Waffle House since 1957 and still comes in regularly to greet customers like a Wal-Mart hostess. Most of them know her; one of them says she looks like Lena Horne.

Breakfast being the busiest time of day, the company tries to situate its stores on the right side of the road to the heaviest morning traffic. Customers at that hour witness a short-order fandango that's rare in restaurants these days. Waffle House cooks do not consult written orders or video monitors. Instead, waitresses line up at the "wait-and-watch" mark, a colored tile on the floor, and take turns calling out orders in a stream-o'- slang that can sound like a tobacco auction. (Hash browns all the way comes out *scattered-smothered-covered-chunked-topped-diced-peppered*.) Then the servers watch as the cook acknowledges the order and records it symbolically with condiments on plates. A jelly package denotes eggs, a butter cup a waffle, an upside-down butter cup a pecan waffle.

Even the most fluent grill operators can be left speechless on occasion. Daryl Harper, the first-shift cook at Unit 7, can flip omelets and juggle eggs like some Cirque du Soleil acrobat. But he's taken aback when a waitress shouts an order for "scrambled with sugar."

He puts down his frying pan and looks at her as if she's trying to be funny. *Who you callin' sugar, sugar?*

She rolls her eyes. "She wants a little sugar in her scrambled eggs, OK?"

Daryl puts a package of sugar on a plate and turns back to the grill. Learn something every day.

### **Planting 'yellow seeds'**

The first song on every Waffle House jukebox is "Waffle House Family, Part 1," a lively ditty performed by Mary Welch Rogers, the CEO's wife. Not every employee appreciates it.

When someone selects the title during the lunch rush at Unit 1000 in Avondale Estates, waitress Jackie Almond glares at the infernal music machine and snarls, "Death to the person who put on the Waffle House song!"

Some customers think it's cute to play one Waffle House song after another. Sometimes they'll punch up \$ 10 worth of them and skedaddle. The help gets sick of it. One regular liked to play the songs so much that Jackie called him Aggravatin' Richard.

"Waffle House Family" has a verse that seems appropriate for this particular franchise:

*Long ago, Tom and Joe  
Planted little yellow seeds  
And watched 'em grow.*

Unit 1000 is what became of the first seed. On Labor Day 1955, the uber-wafflehaus opened down the street from here on College Avenue. Joe Rogers Sr., a manager for the Toddle House chain of diners, was unhappy that the company didn't allow employees to invest in its stock. So he decided to start his own company with a neighbor in Avondale, real estate man Tom Forkner. A few years later, an Atlanta equipment salesman who had been supplying them borrowed the concept again and launched the Huddle House chain. If you're keeping score, that's Toddle to Waffle to Huddle.

Unit 1 was mothballed a few years ago --- it became a Chinese restaurant --- and was replaced by the much larger Unit 1000. But the same old faces still come around for lunch. Roosevelt Murray, a welder, sits at the counter with Lloyd X. Creecy, a retired school administrator, and they talk about Kosovo over eggs and raisin toast. Connie Bailey, a hardware clerk, walks in the door, and her friend Jackie orders up her usual cheeseburger by instructing the cook to "Feed Connie!" (Later, when Connie doesn't finish her chocolate cream pie, Jackie snitches a bite and Connie cries, "Feed Jackie!")

"See, this place is like our club," says Jack Haralson, a leather-skinned auto mechanic, who sits at the back booth sucking cigarettes and sipping coffee. "I'll bet I come in here three times a day. Been doing it for years."

He's been doing it, in fact, since the beginning. He was there on Labor Day '55. The man across the table from him, Doug Jordan, was there even earlier: He laid the restroom tile for Unit 1.

They both remember stopping by that day for free Cokes and hearing Joe Sr. tell anyone who would listen that someday Waffle Houses would cover Dixie like the dew.

"Everyone laughed at him," Jack recalls, with a deep chuckle. He takes another sip of coffee. Looks at the cup. "You know, these used to be bigger."

A waitress interrupts him. "Jack! Telephone!"

The garage knows exactly where to find him. A funeral home is bringing over its hearses for servicing. Jack stubs out his Marlboro and heads for the door.

"I'll be back," he says, and no one doubts him.

### **The secret of Flavor Fry**

"Are you looking for a job full of excitement? Great pay? Great benefits? Come join the fun today: The Waffle House Way!"

The orange recruitment poster practically grabs customers by the lapels as they enter Unit 1215 on Peachtree Industrial Boulevard in Suwanee. Like other fast-food outfits, Waffle House is constantly looking for help --- even the back of the bill invites job applicants. But the fun and excitement apparently eluded some of the workers at this location.

Yesterday, in the middle of second shift, a couple of them walked off the job and didn't return. Which is why the woman with two names is working the counter today.

"They needed help. This isn't my regular unit."

One of the tags on her brown-and-white striped blouse says Melanie Ford; the other says Penelope the Salesperson. Some customers started calling her Penelope for some reason, and she liked the idea of a stage name so much that she kept it. Maybe it made her feel like Cher. It isn't too busy yet this evening --- the Little League families and high school kids have yet to come - -- so Melanie pushes back her brown hair and talks about what it's like being a Waffle House "salesperson," as the company calls servers.

"It's pretty good," she says. Subminimum wage, but you can net \$30 to \$50 a day in tips, and you don't have to split it with the others. Bonuses. Decent benefits. Employee stock plan. One waitress in South Carolina is said to own more than \$ 500,000 worth of company stock.

The Waffle House job to avoid, she says, is unit manager. "I'd take a pay cut not to be a manager. Those people work too hard. My manager at 761, she'd work two or three days in a row and sleep in the back on a couple of chairs pulled together. I brought her a little mattress."

Oh, there's one other benefit. Working at the Waffle House is the cheapest all-you-can-eat deal in town. The company deducts \$ 2.25 a day from each full-time paycheck on the assumption that employees will be too busy not to dine in. They typically eat kitchen mistakes. Sometimes Melanie sneaks a little takeout.

"I took some hash browns home the other day," she says, "but they didn't taste the same. Know why? I didn't use Flavor Fry."

Flavor Fry is the butter substitute the grill operator ladles over hash browns like gravy over mashed potatoes. Melanie fetches an industrial-size can of the miracle grease. The label lists coconut oil, cottonseed oil, partially hydrogenated soybean oil --- a 90-proof cholesterol cocktail.

"It's got all that in it?" she says, scrunching up her face. The dinner trade is starting to trickle in. Before she heads back to the grill, she hides the can under the counter. "Maybe I shouldn't have shown you that."

### **They only come out at night**

One of the oddest things about Waffle House is how places that look so identical can be so distinct. Take Unit 1058, at Pharr and Piedmont roads in Buckhead. Other Waffle Houses attract delivery vans or police cruisers. This one gets stretch limousines.

"All the limo drivers hang out here," says Audran Johnson, a bulky young man parked in the front booth while his long white dream machine sits outside glowing fabulously under the streetlights. "I just wish they had cappuccino."

It's 2 a.m., and the bar crowd is starting to show its glassy eyes. The foursome in the back corner are celebrating a birthday and have already hit four watering holes. The student at the counter is blotting up alcohol with a ham steak and hash browns. The chiquita in the sequined cocktail dress is drawing stares from a roomful of men too tipsy to disguise their wandering eyes.

"We call this the Comedy Club," says waitress Angel Payne, who wears Mardi Gras beads in her hair, an impromptu gift from one of her customers. " Everyone who comes in here after the bars close thinks he's a comedian."

Well, not everyone. She says former Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson came in for a bacon-egg-and-cheese sandwich the night before. "He autographed my ticket book."

And the classy-looking trio in the last window booth certainly don't look looped. The three tastefully dressed Golden Girls are chanteuses who have been performing at a nearby restaurant. When they're finished singing, wherever the job, they cap the evening with eggs and grits at the closest Waffle House. They know to bring their evening wraps.

"They keep the air so cold in these places," Theresa Breuer says. "Chamblee-Tucker Road is the worst; you have to wear your fur in that Waffle House."

The overnight shift is the diciest time for employees. Robberies, altercations, customers passing out or tossing their grits --- all the annoying stuff happens in the middle of the night. One evening this spring, a bomb threat cleared out Unit 1058 at 1 a.m.

But tonight, the house is merely busy and rowdy in a good-natured way. Although there is one guy you wonder about. A young man waiting in line for a table is talking loudly and drawing uncomfortable glances.

The menu, he says, stroking his goatee . . . that jumbled menu with the big-headed caricatures and the "big deal" dinners . . . it's written in secret code. And the heart of the code, he continues, whipping out a sketchbook to make his point by drawing a diagram, is that box in the middle where they reveal the seven guises of hash browns.

"It's the hash browns, man," he says, as earnestly as a "Star Wars" cultist expounding on the Force. "It's all about the hash browns."

In the wee small hours at the Waffle House, who can argue?