

A Main Street mainstay no matter the challenge **Springs Inn Cafe owners celebrate 40 years of dishing up comfort**

When newlyweds Jon and Carla Niemeyer agreed to lend a hand at her parent's restaurant for "a little while," back in 1980, the couple never dreamt that in April 2020, they would be celebrating 40 years of serving customers at the Springs Inn Cafe in Wessington Springs.

"Jon and I have thoroughly enjoyed serving the many customers from Springs and all over the planet over the past four decades," Carla said. "We want to thank everyone for their 40 years of patronage."

Early days of the Springs Inn Cafe

Carla's parents, Bill and Dolores Jacomet bought the Springs Inn Cafe in October 1967. After seven years, they sold the cafe, Bill took a job with the state, and the family packed up and moved to Pierre, SD.

Carla grew up in the restaurant business and it was natural for her to continue in the food service industry after high school. While working as an assistant manager at The Happy Chef in Pierre, Carla found her gaze falling on the restaurant's cook, Jon.

"We met at The Happy Chef but I also knew of him from the halls of Pierre Riggs High School. I was the pursuer," Carla said with a laugh. "But he just didn't get it. Every shift I'd ask, 'what are you going to do tonight' and he'd always reply with 'I don't know.' I hoped someday he'd finally ask to do something together."

Jon eventually got wise to Carla's attempts at romance and he asked her to his senior prom.

"Once he got ahold of me, he wouldn't let go," Carla said, smiling. "Jon graduated in 1979 and we were married in January of 1980."

Jon and Carla step up to help for "a little while"

In 1978, Carla's parents were asked to move back to Wessington Springs to run the cafe, as it had closed down. Then in the spring of 1980, Carla's brother Jeff, who had been working at the cafe, decided it was time for him to move on. Dolores put out the call for help and Jon and Carla answered — she stepped up as a waitress and Jon would cook.

"In a small-town restaurant, you do whatever you need to do," Jon said. "Just like today, you run and take care of the needs of that moment."

Jon is quick to give Carla credit for her dedication and seemingly endless stores of energy.

"When we serve our famous Sunday buffet, Carla runs her butt off — 20,000 steps isn't unheard of," Jon said, marveling at the distance Carla regularly logged on her wristband activity tracker.

Jon said that before COVID-19 restrictions, after the last customer was served on Sunday, she would head home, take a 15-30 minute nap, then go to church at the Manor and play cards with her friends.

"It's hard to imagine her devotion. She will run herself into the ground all day and still make it out to play cards at the Manor with all her ladies, her previous customers. I can't say how much I respect her for that."

No strangers to facing adversity

In February 1993, a fire tore through Main Street, destroying Thornton Drug, The Clothes Gallery Krohmer/Connell New York Life Insurance and the Springs Inn Cafe.

"The cafe burned early Tuesday morning. We couldn't even catch our breath and people were asking us to reopen," Carla remembers. "No one was using the kitchen at the Prairie Lounge and by Sunday noon, we reopened with our traditional Sunday buffet and continued to serve from there."

While continuing to serve customers from "up on the hill," Jon and Carla were bombarded with requests to rebuild. Town residents were intent on having a restaurant on Main Street and even began depositing money into a cafe-rebuilding account at the bank.

"It wasn't going fast enough though for Lawrence Caffee, so he ended up building a new cafe and gave everyone back their money," Carla said, referring to the longtime Wessington Springs businessman and auto dealership owner. "The lot where Springs Inn sits now was empty from a previous fire at the grocery store, so Lawrence hired a restaurant company to come in and help design the new cafe."

Jon said that while he designed the kitchen area, Lawrence had his own ideas about the restaurant's design and the dining room kept getting "bigger and bigger."

"Most people thought if the cafe didn't make it, Lawrence would park cars in it or put a grocery store there," laughed Carla. "Lawrence and Ada are great people and over the years, we became great friends."

Resiliency is a quality that is inherent in Jon and Carla, and it is guiding them through the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, just as it did in 2005, when two back-to-back ice storms brought three inches of ice and caused Springs to go dark and without power for five days.

"It was during hunting season and we had some hunters that were electricians and helped hot wire the building," Jon recalls. "Those kinds of relationships keep us going. Those hunters were already coming to eat when Carla's parents had the old cafe and they come to the Springs Inn still. They've kept coming for four generations now."

During the power outage, Jon and Carla were able to secure a donated generator from a farmer from Faulkton nearby where Jon's folks lived — and just in the nick of time.

"We had electricians from eight states working around the clock to get power to 8,000 downed poles between Plankinton and Huron," said Carla. "We were feeding people really, really late and really, really early."

While looking back at the ice storm, Jon shared a memory that brought levity to an intense, scary time.

"We learned to not leave Clifford (Kogel) in charge of filling the generator with gas," Jon said, shaking his head with a smile. "Suddenly the lights go out and I'm trying to grill hamburgers. It was hot, with no ventilation and no hood fan. I'm reading tickets in the dark and where was Cliff? He was at the Lounge."

As Jon and Carla reflect together on their storied 40 years running the Springs Inn Cafe, they revisit trying times and know that their dedication will help them press on during the current global health and economic crisis.

"Right now is a huge challenge for everyone too with emotion swings happening everyday. We've just got to keep fighting the fight," Jon said.

When asked if there was any question about how they'd continue to operate amid the new COVID-19 guidelines, Carla said they've rolled with the punches and faced this new normal head on.

"I didn't even think about it," she said. "We need to do this. We need to keep doing what we've done the past 40 years."

"Through all the other things we've dealt with — fire, ice storms, tornadoes — with those other ones, people would really come together and help to get each other going," Jon said. "With this, you don't see that as much because we need to distance ourselves. But it's there. Mentally, we are pulling that wagon up the hill together."

Employees through the decades

According to Jon and Carla, Springs Inn employees are family — and over the years, their family members have also put in many hours at the cafe.

Carla and Jon's son, Justus, started washing dishes at the Springs Inn at age 14 and continued through high school. During his time studying at Southeast Tech, he came home nearly every weekend to work.

"After graduating from Tech, he worked as the Wessington Springs High School computer tech for four years, and continued doing dishes for us the entire time," Carla said. "He never wanted to learn to cook at the cafe but now that he moved to Lincoln, NE for work, he's become a very good cook at home. He recently told Jon and I that the cafe 'means the world to him.'"

Carla points out that all of her siblings, Cheryl, Jeff, Lynn and Mike, along with nephews Chad and Judd Reifers and niece Nicole Reifers also worked at the cafe at some point in time.

"One thing about us is that we don't have to look for people, we keep our people," Carla said matter-of-factly. "The main reason we lose an employee is that they move or graduate from high school — and then they come back and work for us during the summer."

Carla remembers an employee that would point out John's whistling in the kitchen.

"I would be waiting for food as Jon — who is a terrible whistler — was cooking and whistling. That employee and I would look at each other and he'd say, 'it's better than the alternative,' because if Jon's not whistling, he's not happy."

“Overall we’ve had awesome help through the years. We would love to have a reunion someday of all employees,” said Carla. “We also have a lot of siblings work here, a lot of times coming in to apply the day of their 14th birthday.”

A menu that comes from the heart

Inspiration for the food served at Springs Inn is drawn from tradition, family recipes and comfort.

“A lot of what we serve today comes from what mom and dad put together,” Carla said. “My parents started the tradition of our famous Sunday brunch.”

Jon added that their burgers are a “big thing” and some menu item ideas come from employees. During their limited time off, Jon likes to take Carla to “trendy restaurants” across South Dakota to check out what’s up-and-coming in the food world.

When it comes to the cafe owners themselves, Carla’s favorites are broasted chicken and burgers. For Jon, his favorite is usually the daily special — which typically lies within the realm of comfort food.

“My favorite food depends on the day and is always comfort food,” Jon said. “Right now, everybody needs some comfort. There’s nothing like meat and potatoes.”

When seeking solace of their own, Jon and Carla say that they find it in their customers and are grateful for the continued support now and over the last 40 years.

“People need some normalcy right now. If that’s the familiarity and comfort of the Springs Inn food, that’s ok with us,” Jon said. “We are in this together and we will stay open as long as we can.”



Jon and Carla Niemeyer are shown in front of their restaurant, the Springs Inn Cafe. April 2020 marked 40 years of the Wessington Springs cornerstone dining establishment.