

# Feels Like Home

Sherleen Mahoney

## COTTON PATCH CAFE ELEVATES SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY WITH RENEWED BRANDING EFFORTS

In Southern kitchens, crispy chicken fried steaks are sizzling, tender cuts of pork chops are grilling, home-style meatloaves are baking, and hearty chicken and dumplings are simmering—all lovingly prepared from scratch. These time-honored traditions are not only found in Southern homes, but also at Cotton Patch Cafe, where it feels like home.

## SOUTHERN COMFORT FOOD

Southern home-style scratch cooking, made in-house, using the freshest ingredients, prepared with love

What started as a mom-and-pop restaurant in Nacogdoches, Texas, in 1989 is now a popular Southern regional brand with 52 locations in Arkansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas.

"The idea behind the first Cotton Patch Cafe was to create a local restaurant that offered great food made from scratch, served by caring folks who are part of your community," said Cotton Patch Cafe CEO Larry Ryback.

For almost 30 years, Cotton Patch, a small-town staple, has been serving traditional Southern comfort meals that remind guests of their hometown roots.

"We strive to be the best Southern regional brand we can be," said Liz Phillips, Director of Marketing at Cotton Patch Cafe. "We may evolve, but we always stay true to our roots and Southern hospitality."

The brand's signature and No. 1 selling dish is chicken fried steak. Lean cuts of tenderized USDA Choice steaks are hand-breaded in seasoned flour and batter. Each steak is fried, then topped with piping-hot house-made cream gravy.

Eric Justice, Executive Chef at Cotton Patch Cafe, grew up in Texas and authentically understands Southern-style home cooking.

"Southern home-style scratch cooking, to me, means made in-house, using the freshest ingredients, prepared with love—like you would for your family's Sunday dinner," he said. "This style of cooking has soul and passion, and it means doing it the right way, not with shortcuts."

Justice has been cooking for 35 years and still enjoys creating new and interesting flavors.

"The freedom to play around with food all the time is what I enjoy most," he said. "I like the challenge of creating something that has some intrigue but also feels familiar and is not too 'out there.' it doesn't matter how great it tastes if no one will try it, so I am always working to strike a balance there."

A recent fun innovation was chicken fried bacon, introduced last year as an appetizer, six bacon strips are fried golden brown with a side of home-style gravy or ranch dressing.

"It's the marriage of two things that are well loved in Southern cuisine: bacon and chicken fried! How could it not be a big hit?" Justice said. "Perfecting chicken fried bacon was much harder than I thought it would be. Finding the right cut of bacon so it would be cooked on the inside and crispy on the outside took several iterations. Once we got the crispy bacon right, we wanted to punch it up a bit, so I came up with a pork rub seasoning to spice it up."

The culinary team also considers guests who want lighter options from time to time.

"While staying in our Southern home-style cuisine wheelhouse, we will offer items we know we can make well," Justice said. "We are playing around with grilled proteins, roasted vegetables and punchy sauces and gravies to flavor the dishes, such as a chipotle maple glaze."

In addition to the standard kids' menu, a Kids Fit menu is available in Allen, Frisco, Lewisville and Rockwall, Texas. Developed by Texas Pro Start culinary students and overseen by a Medical City Children's Hospital registered dietitian, the menu includes healthier options, such as grilled chicken tenders, turkey wraps and includes at least two servings of fruits and vegetables.

The entire menu rotates five times a year, introducing new entrees and bringing back old favorites.

"Popularity and time of the year usually determine how we rotate the menu," Justice said, "if guests are requesting a past item that sold really well with lots of fanfare, we will consider it making a second appearance if it fits the time of year. We like to package them up with a theme or pair them with a season. For example, we offer a lot of Cajun style and spicy seafood dishes around Mardi Gras and Lent."

New additions include a homemade chocolate cream pie with an Oreo-cookie crust, fish fry Fridays and Cajun grilled shrimp.

"Your mama doesn't make the same thing every day," Phillips added. "She likes to make special meals and change up her kitchen, it's the same thing here. And as an abundant-value brand, you'll leave full and have leftovers to take home."

## REBRANDING EFFORTS

Cotton Patch Cafe was acquired by Altamont Capital Partners in 2015. Following the acquisition, a rebranding effort was launched which led to a new prototype that embraces a rustic-contemporary farmhouse design.

"Cotton Patch Cafe was built on a culture of Southern hospitality," Phillips said. "Our team embodies the culture and brings it to life. The farmhouse design coupled with our unique form of hospitality provide guests with a memorable experience."

"The prototype aims to make guests feel welcome and comfortable, like being at home," added Angela Harmsen, Manager of Construction and Design.

The exterior mixes board-and-batten siding with a corrugated metal wrap to resemble a classic barn. Accents include awnings with stone pillars, porch lights and a retro red-and-white "Cafe" sign that invites guests to come in for a relaxed meal. Ample exterior lighting around the building and parking areas provides safety and enhances the experience. Part of the site selection strategy is to include more parking for guests, typically 20-30 additional parking spaces than is required by code. River rocks, wild flowers and grasses complete the exterior look.

Inside, exposed wooden rafters, brick accents and an open floor plan with fence-inspired space dividers create a contemporary farmhouse feel. Sound-absorbing ceiling panels were installed between the rafters. The polished concrete floor is easy to maintain and lends itself to the industrial theme. The lighting package includes an antique metal-and-rope Edison-style chandelier above the front entrance, red lampshades made from metal turbofan tops and other industrial farmhouse pendants.

Art includes images of farm animals, an inspirational word collage with barn-rolling hardware, and an actual windmill fan takes center stage over the main dining room. Reclaimed wood and blue-and white tiles accentuate the bar area. At the entry, the prototype's most remarkable feature is a large distressed wood panel that says, "Being here feels like coming home." A rear dining area features an eclectic collection of tin, copper and corrugated metal ceiling tiles with a cluster of hanging lights. The mix of tiles were known to be found in rural farmhouse kitchens.

"The design speaks to the type of food we serve," Harmsen said. "These elements add a modern touch to the decor while still incorporating the farmhouse look and feel. One of my favorite features is the blue-and-white tiles above the bar area that looks like grandma's country quilt."

"The decor comes from one vendor who knows our specs and standards," said Maria Johnson, CRFP, Vice President of Development at Cotton Patch Cafe.

Newly added decor elements include a collection of fun memorabilia, such as tiered mason jar displays and potted plants. The team was deliberate to incorporate specifications that are not difficult or expensive to source, repair or replace.

Cotton Patch started its new prototype remodel program in 2016, completing four that year. Five restaurants were reimaged in 2017, and nine are scheduled for 2018. Three free standing locations will be built this year, and the existing locations are being remodeled, pulling in elements from the prototype as much as possible.

The remodels are determined by criteria such as lease term expiration, sales growth opportunities and the condition of the asset. The company's sales trends are used as guidelines to determine which remodel package a location will receive. The company treats each location uniquely. The package depends on the overall real estate strategy for the market and the individual restaurant. If a restaurant does not qualify for a remodel package, it receives repairs as needed.

Remodels take up to three weeks to complete and most require closing the restaurant; however, some may be completed overnight. With both new restaurants and reimages, the goal is to project one brand image across prototypes regardless of building age.

## NIMBLE TEAM

Under the direction of Johnson, the facilities team includes a facility manager and a coordinator. The facility manager handles restaurant requests for repairs and maintenance, while the coordinator supports the team by ordering furniture and equipment and aiding the restaurants with any questions that arise.

According to Johnson, her biggest challenge is serving restaurants in rural markets, especially when emergency repairs and replacements are necessary.

"it is sometimes difficult to find local vendors, so we have to factor in longer lead times and extra expenses for travel," she said.

In order to mitigate these issues, the facilities team provides ongoing training for the operations teams. For example, the restaurant teams are provided troubleshooting guides to review before calling for service. The facilities team also works to identify recurring issues to determine how to stop or reduce them. New construction turnover training includes a walk through of the restaurant and a thorough review of troubleshooting practices as well as information on who to call and what to do when problems occur.

In the back of the house, the cooking equipment includes fryers, a flat-top griddle, a Charbroiler, an oven and a range. There's also several refrigerated prep tables, a standalone refrigerator/freezer and a walk-in refrigerator/freezer.

For a brand that is known as Chicken Fried Nation, its most critical kitchen assets are the fryers.

"There is no redundancy built in for equipment failures so it's important that equipment is fixed ASAP to reduce down time," Johnson said. "There is plenty of refrigeration and freezer space to hold product while equipment is being repaired."

As a fry-heavy kitchen, the used cooking oil is placed in an outside collection bin for recycling.

"As a small team, we outsource services to keep our head count low," Johnson said.

There's a partner with a broker that manages waste, cooking oil and grease trap pumping services. The broker solicits service bids for the best rate and is responsible for managing the services. A local kitchen supply company purchases the cooking and refrigeration equipment, stainless-steel package, furniture and decor items.

"It's a one-stop shop so we can stay consistent, leverage our buying power and quickly deliver and install items for our stores," Johnson said.

The restaurants also rely on a simplified ordering system for light bulbs and light fixtures. The facilities team is developing a manual for self-installed parts, creating order forms with pictures to order furniture, equipment, decor items and more.

The most common repair and maintenance issues are HVAC/R, plumbing and electrical. The facilities team has local, regional and national vendors in each market for preventive maintenance and service requests. A national fire protection service provides inspections and repairs for the fire suppression system, fire sprinklers, fire extinguishers, emergency lights and exit signs.

The completed services are verified with photos or onsite visits. Additionally, the team visits each location one to two times a year, checking for issues related to plumbing, doors, floors, equipment and more. If issues are found, vendors are notified for service.

"Cotton Patch Cafe is very family oriented," Johnson said. "We're a small company, and we all work together. If someone in another department needs help, we pitch in and do whatever it takes to get the job done."

This year, the facilities team will investigate software solutions for managing, tracking and invoicing work orders; look at ways to reduce costs without affecting design and branding; and continue refining the prototype.

## FUTURE GROWTH

Cotton Patch Cafe owes its success to its home-style scratch cooking, amazing value, Southern hospitality and the local communities that have embraced the restaurants. In this growth phase, the company will build upon its founding legacy and position itself for continued success.

Sherleen Mahoney is a staff writer for Facilitator magazine.