

Kettering's Ritter's shop celebrating 10 years

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Ritter's Frozen Custard in Kettering is celebrating 10 years of service to the community. Pictured are, seated, Susan Heyne, who owns the shop with her husband, Don, and Jenny Balog, a fourth-year crew member; standing are Chuck Moore of TruFoods LLC, the parent company of the Ritter's chain, and Don Heyne.

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Ice cream fans may find it hard to remember when there wasn't a Ritter's Frozen Custard on Wilmington Pike. Then, again, it seems like it was just yesterday that the restaurant opened for business.

Actually, it was 10 years ago.

Don Heyne, owner of the Kettering Ritter's Frozen Custard franchise, stated it doesn't feel like a decade since the shop opened its doors. In the shop's 10 years of existence, Heyne and crew have won the Award of Excellence every year, including two Franchise of the Year awards.

“Ten years went by fast,” Heyne said. “Some are surprised. They’ve been coming all the time, but they ask ‘What have you been here, three or four years?’

“They don’t want to believe me when I tell them it’s been 10 years.”

Heyne said it is easy to remember when the restaurant opened, though.

“We opened June 11, 2001, 6-11-2001,” he said. “Three months before 9-11 (terrorist attacks). It makes it easy to remember.”

Heyne’s shop is one of 31 Ritter’s nationwide under the TRUFOODS, LLC corporate banner.

Heyne said that when he and his wife, Sue, opened the store, he knew it would be difficult. But he didn’t know how difficult.

“It’s been a tumultuous 10 years,” he said. “I thought ‘I’ve got my work cut out for me’.

“Things rarely go to plan,” Heyne continued. “We went into this thinking it would be a nine-month job. We only closed that first winter. The next year, we were open 12 months. I can remember the first summer, too. It was so busy. I went five months with just four hours sleep a night. I lost 25 pounds in five months — while working in an ice cream shop!”

Heyne said as the job settled down some, the job was more enjoyable.

“I remember that once we started slowing down (from the ‘new business rush’) being able to actually talk to the people,” he said. “For the longest time, we were so busy, it was just get the product out the window. Finally, we were able to say ‘hi, how ya doing?’”

Heyne said the move to Ritter’s was easy, but not because of his more recent employment.

“I enjoyed a good career at Reynolds and Reynolds,” he said. “I was there for 27 years.

“But what really prepared me for this — I grew up on a chicken farm. How does that relate? You have to work. My parents ran the farm and they taught me right. My business experience at Reynolds and Reynolds was fine, but growing up on that chicken farm was so valuable.”

Heyne said his wife, Sue, held down a second job to help keep the family finances afloat.

“Many small business es are like that,” he said. “But (Sue) lost that job a few years ago. So I thought ‘hey, we can use her more as an asset here – and turn up the capacity. We decided to turn up the burner on our offsite (schedule).

“So we have been booking extra events and festivals,” Heyne continued. “We’ll be setting up at the Ascension Church festival and we’re waiting to hear back from the Celtic Fest and Dayton Afro American Culture Fest.

“We want to also do more corporate events, graduation open houses... we’re sticklers for the details, and it makes me feel good when we get a second and third chance. It happened this year – we had a graduation party that was the last of three in the same family. And another was a neighbor of a customer from last year.”

As part of the shop's 10-year anniversary, Ritter's will be running a special today, June 16, and Friday, June 17.

"Anyone who buys a scoop of vanilla will be upgraded to a medium (two scoops) and we'll also add a scoop of our Italian ice at no extra cost," Heyne said. "The Italian ice was a great move (addition to the menu). It's great by itself or side-by-side with vanilla. But it's very good when blended, too.

"And when it's very hot (like the weather in the Miami Valley had been recently), Italian ice is one of the most refreshing things I've ever tried. It's kind of an unknown treat."

While some things have remained the same — like the Dog's Night Out, where owners can bring in their pooches for a free scoop on the first Monday of each month — other things have changed.

"In the spring of 2003, we were digging the footer for the drive up window," Heyne said. "We were the third shop in the chain to have one."

Another change came around the midpoint of the shop's 10-year run — the addition of a new menu item.

"We started with just the ice cream, then added Nathan's Hot Dogs," Heyne said. "I had had people coming up constantly since we opened asking if we had hot dogs."

He added with a laugh, "I spent five years training people we don't have hot dogs, then I have to turn around and say 'hey, we have hot dogs!'"

Heyne said that his shop is trying to bring high-quality to the table.

"The hot dog sales haven't been overwhelming, but they are doing okay," he said. "We are not trying to win on price, but quality. We're attracting the quality-minded consumer.

"We have a great chili dog, I will say that."

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