

From the Columbus Business First:

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Tee Jaye's Country Place: 50 years of comfort food, community

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Tee Jaye's Country Place is fighting for as much business as it can despite its days being shorter than ever.

The historic Columbus-based breakfast and family dining chain, which has eight restaurants across Central Ohio is having one of the toughest years in its now 50-year lifespan.

The Covid-19 pandemic continues to be a near universal challenge to restaurants regardless of age or cuisine.

President Dayna Sokol isn't trying to coast on those decades of history, but she does see experience as way through the troubled climate even if it means radical – at least for Tee Jaye's – changes.

Carryout, which wasn't even an option at some restaurants, is now key. The restaurants, which had operated 24 hours for much of the brand's life, are no longer open for late-night dining. And those hours are unlikely to return. Competition has come and gone, the economy has gone up and down, but Sokol said there will always be a place for affordable dining – maybe now more than ever.



JEFFRY KONCZAL

Tee Jaye's owner, Dayna Sokol, outside the Morse and High Street location.

By 1970, he was ready to get back in the restaurant world and he purchased the Hasty Tasty Drive-in at 1385 Parsons Ave., where the original Tee Jaye's still operates today.

The right recipe

Nita Sokol, the family's matriarch, renamed the new restaurant Tee Jaye's – Tee for her love of golf and Jaye, which is their son Randy's middle name. It wasn't her only influence on the business.

Before turning to the country-style cooking the brand is known for today, Tee Jaye's was another burger joint, but by then the market was crowded with cheeseburgers and fries.

The entire family – Jules, Nita and the kids – took a long road trip through Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee to scout for ideas to bring back to Columbus.

The Sokols did not grow up with biscuits and gravy as a staple of their diet and some of their first experiences didn't inspire confidence in the cuisine. Grits, for instance, were met with initial disdain from the kids.

"It wasn't that we didn't like it as much as we didn't grow up on it. So it was unfamiliar," Dayna Sokol said. "We've grown to love it."

Nita Sokol was the first in the family to embrace the county-style menu. Three eggs, sausage and toast cost 99 cents. Three eggs, bacon and potatoes were \$1.59. The signature Barnyard Buster was born after Jules Sokol saw a customer mixing all the elements – sausage gravy, biscuits, eggs, potatoes – on her plate.

He told *Columbus Business First* in 2000 that it looked like a mess to him, but the woman insisted that's the authentic way to eat that combination.

Dayna Sokol said one of their cooks, Rosie, teamed up with their dad and mom to create many of the recipes still on the menu today.

"She wrote the recipes out by hand," Sokol said.

Sokol family recipes for meatloaf, spaghetti and liver-and-onions became part of the mix.

A part of the community

Store No. 2 opened on Cleveland Avenue. The Hamilton Road restaurant, which is still open, was the third. The original aspirations were to be bigger.

The first Tee Jaye's opened in a golden age of chain restaurant concepts. The Cracker Barrel started in Tennessee in 1969. Though Bob Evans was founded in 1946, its expansion began in earnest in the late 1960s. Waffle House and IHOP started in the late 1950s. McDonald's and Pizza Hut started in the 1950s. Wendy's, Long John Silvers, Arby's, Taco Bell and other fast food brands that still stand today started in the next decade.

Sokol envisioned a chain of dozens, though it peaked at 13 sites. But with five decades of history and eight restaurants still serving daily, none can deny the success the brand has achieved.

As a business strategy, Tee Jaye's was shrewd at grabbing and remodeling existing restaurant spaces in established communities. No expensive new builds or planting flashy flagships in the next big up-and-coming community. Over the years, old Country Kitchens, Western Pancake Houses and Village Inns became new Tee Jaye's.

Even the old Jerry's Drive In on Morse Road near High Street – the one with the giant neon arrow – was converted into a Tee Jaye's.

It's a lower-overhead plan that other chains have followed. Though it's a different dining segment, Roosters takes a similar approach.

Sokol credited community involvement as key to surviving the decades.

"You need to be out there and have good relationships," she said. "It was always important to us to be in communities. That's why we weren't building restaurants off the freeways."

A shifting landscape

Dayna Sokol started in the business in 1975 as a hostess. She was a waitress through college, then manager of the Parsons Avenue restaurant, then district manager. She made her way into the president's office in 2005.

Nita died in 1989. Jules in 2003. All of the siblings have been involved in the business. Randy Sokol preceded Dayna as president. Sister Ronnie Sokol handles social media while sister Beverlee Sokol was a manager.

One of the biggest changes is in the competition over time.

Sokol said although there were more classic greasy spoon diners back in the day, the years have brought more and more challengers, be it expansion by direct competitors such as Cracker Barrel or Bob Evans, or fast food chains making a play for consumers seeking a quick, affordable meal.

The first Tee Jaye's predates the Egg McMuffin by two years. McDonald's has grown to dominate the breakfast space in the decades since, while other fast feeders have moved into that space as well. After a few short-lived tries in the past, Dublin-based Wendy's launched a nationwide breakfast menu in the spring.

While the sit-down experience at Tee Jaye's isn't exactly equivalent to going through a drive-through, it's undoubtable that former customers might have migrated to the quicker service of fast food.

And then there's brunch. Was that concept even embraced in the meat-and-potatoes Midwest of the early 1970s?

The demographics have changed as well.

"In the 1970s and '80s, we had families from German Village and people from downtown, but there was a definite shift toward blue-collar workers," she said.

And over the years, the menu has remained consistent. Items come and go, but there haven't been any radical shifts. Breakfast is a day-long staple alongside some more traditional lunch and supper offerings.

The current challenge

With 50 years of business history, Tee Jaye's has forgotten more sales fluctuations than other businesses ever experience.

Sokol said in recent years, the restaurants in Newark and Zanesville as well as the West Broad street store, which has been aided by Hollywood Columbus Casino

traffic, have been doing well. The other five units a little less so. Some slightly up, some down a little.

“A lot of it is seasonal,” she said. “Fall is actually a good time for us. Winter depends on the weather.”

It’s helped by being in a segment – family dining – that is traditionally better guarded against fluctuations with the economy. There might not be grand highs in the good years, but the troughs aren’t there in the down years as more budget-conscious consumers seek more affordable brands.

“The prices are good,” she said. “Plus everybody loves breakfast. You can eat it at any time.”

Fellow Central Ohio-based breakfast brand Bob Evans has made similar observations over the years.

Tee Jaye’s was able to survive on carryout during the initial shutdown of restaurants caused the pandemic from March to May. That business, which isn’t traditionally a big revenue contributor, has helped sustain the restaurant chain since reopening. Some of the stores didn’t even offer carryout, though all do now.

Still, the physical restaurants, as with their brethren in the industry, are struggling.

“On West Broad Street we can seat 110, but that’s down from 199,” she said. “That hurts us. That hurts our wait staff.”

A counter that once sat 18 now seats two under the new rules. The Hamilton Road restaurant now closes at 3 p.m. It doesn’t even have a second/dinner shift now. And none of the restaurants operate day and night anymore.

“We’d always been open 24 hours,” she said. “My parents believed in that. The world doesn’t stop at night.”

Sokol said although that wasn’t a huge part of sales, but those lost sales now need to be found elsewhere.

Many employees have not wanted to return to work. The reasons vary, but mirror those that other operators have shared – childcare concerns, health worries and, at

least until the benefit expired, the fact that some were making more money from unemployment than they would at work.

To top it all off, there have been menu shortages to sort through as eggs, potatoes and pork have been in short supply for stretches of time.

Sokol said she knows there is no magic answer to the current situation, but will let hospitality and affordability guide the way.

“We just want to get back to doing business, to looking normal,” she said. “It’s weird to come in and see the unused tables and see the partitions between tables.

“Come in. We’ll still take care of you. We’ll make sure you’re safe.”

Dan Eaton

Staff reporter

Columbus Business First



That and the gravy-smothered Barnyard Buster, of course. (Though it's worth noting that the original price of that particular menu item will return for its one-day anniversary celebration Sept. 12.)

Early days

Jules Sokol spent decades in the restaurant business before starting Tee Jaye's. His first restaurant job was in the late 1940s when he worked at the Broad and Lincoln Hotel in downtown Columbus. He then created the Beverlee Drive-ins, a car hop hamburger chain, which started at the corner of Broad Street and James Road on the city's east side.

In detail:

Tee Jaye's Country Place

Breakfast and family dining restaurant chain

Founded: 1970

President: Dayna Sokol

Employees: 300

Locations: 8

Founder: Jules Sokol, Nita Sokol

"Customers used to line up in cars a mile down the street," Sokol recalled in a 2000 interview with Columbus Business First. "Everybody was into car-hop service those days."

He grew that business to 24 units across Ohio, but in the 1960s, Sokol had health problems and the Beverlee Drive-ins went out of business.