

TRANSCRIPT: Katzinger's Founder Diane Warren interviewed by Bethia Wolf

BETHIA WOLF: My name is Bethia Wolf. I am the co-founder, co-owner of Columbus Food Adventures and today we're going a special tour for the Ohio Restaurant Association and going to visit some of the restaurants we work with in and around Columbus.

Columbus Food Adventures has been in business for 9 years, we started in 2010. We started with three different tour itineraries and now we have a dozen tours that we do. All of that providing the Columbus food scene, restaurants, bakeries, food trucks, all kinds of different food vendors and really just helping people explore Columbus, all the different aspects of the amazing food we have here in Columbus.

[background music as Bethia drives through Columbus]

So we are - I'm heading down to German Village, our first stop is a real Columbus institution - over 30 years old. Katzinger's Deli and we're going to be meeting the founder Diane Warren which is pretty exciting.

Katzinger's is a stop on our German Village tour. We take people there twice a week on Saturday and Sunday. It's always fun to introduce them to new and more established businesses. So we have um, places that have been open a few months, places that have been open decades and we give them a chance to provide samples to the tour guests so people get a chance to try their food and we also give them a chance to kind of tell their story. Maybe they share something, maybe an aspect of their business that people are less familiar with.

[Background music as Bethia enters Katzinger's - camera is panning around the counter and dining room.]

BETHIA WOLF: We are here at Katzinger's Deli now, in German Village, and we are with one of the founders of Katzinger's, Diane Warren who's going to be telling us a little bit more about Katzinger's history and all the wonderful things they do.

DIANE WARREN: Thank you! I recall you ordered the Reuben which has been Katzinger's number one seller since we opened in 1984. So that's what, 35 years ago? Right. Every friggin' day. Every day, every day, always the best seller.

BETHIA WOLF: But you have quite a few different varieties of different Reubens as well.

DIANE WARREN: We do and I would love to show you a menu. The best place to see it is the menu board which is, when you walk in the front door, there is this huge menu board that's got all the sandwiches, the side dishes, the soups, salads, desserts, drinks and all of our the stuff that you need to have a great meal at Katzinger's.

BETHIA WOLF: And how many different sandwiches are there?

DIANE WARREN: Oh, you know, oh - I think the food is here! Yum!

SERVER: Number 1 deli sized and a number 1 gluten-free.

DIANE WARREN: Thank you!

SERVER: You guys enjoy!

DIANE WARREN: So this is the gluten-free and this is the regular. My husband at the time, Steve Warren, and I had just moved back from Chicago - Rachel was a baby. We moved back because we wanted her to have grandparents and my folks lived here. And we had no plan when we came back. We'd been in

the food business for a long time. It's all we knew. We didn't really know what we wanted to do. One day Steve said to me, "Do you want to open a deli?" And I went, "I don't know, do you?" And he said, "You do!" And I went, "Okay." It was just that stupid. You should never, ever, ever open a business like that, ever. That's my advice to anyone that's watching.

Boy it was a long road to getting it to be successful. As it turned out it was a fabulous decision and I could not be happier with having done this. It was an amazing journey. We learned so much about food. We learned so much about people. About management. We learned about personal taste and what sells and what doesn't and merchandising and everything that you can think of that's involved with the restaurant business, we learned it.

Our daughter Rachel started working here when she was about 12 - bussing tables and that kind of thing and then she grew up and sort of liked doing more things with customers and then she was making sandwiches and then she was working in the kitchen and then she was working in the specialty foods area where she got really got into learning about the cheeses, and the meats, and the olive oils and that fabulous stuff. She did that. And then she went, "Okay, I'm done with this."

And she moved to New York, by herself, for nine years she lived in New York. And she kind of made her way there where she also worked with food. She was the prepared food chef at a wonderful little specialty food store in Brooklyn and she was great. But then she said I want to come home as our family has a tendency to do. My family is like the Hotel California. You can check out with my family but you cannot check out. Anyway, she moved back a few years ago and started working in the kitchen. She's still here - she's still working here.

My favorite part about it is being shocked and amazed every single day that it's still here and that it's still popular and that people still come, walk in the doors and people still say this is a great place and I hear, "This is the best Reuben I've ever had. It's amazing to me every day. But it's not me that does that. This is my staff. Over the years I've had some people, I've had people who've been here as long as 20 years. And it just does my heart so good every time we think of that. These guys they stick around and they take their sense of ownership of it and they're the ones that make it work and I'm so fortunate to have them.

I left Columbus in 1977. I moved to Ann Arbor for five years. Steve and I did. And I had always wanted to have a deli. I mean it's like there was something in my DNA that said, "Someday you're doing corned beef." And I came back to Columbus in 1984 and I kind of looked around at what was going on and Nationwide had opened. People were moving here from the East Coast. And I went, "Now's the time." So when Steve said to me, "Do you want to open a deli?" And I went, "If you do," and he said "Okay, if you do." I went, "This is the time, this is the time."

When we first opened the deli we had all these specialty foods. We had extra virgin olive oil which we no longer sell but we had extra virgin olive oil, we had goat cheese and I would go around and I would sample these things.

And people would go, "I can't eat anything from goats. Balsamic vinegar? I never heard of that. I can't taste that." It was a Midwestern thing to do. "Extra virgin olive oil - does that have anything to do with sex?"

I did all these flyers and I would talk with them, "Taste a little bit, it's so good!" And it was this whole process of educating a clientele that was not familiar. Now, there's a whole bunch of things that worked in our favor. One of them was it wasn't too long before people started traveling more. Kids that went to summer camp would come back and say, "I had this cheese - can I buy this in Columbus?"

So that worked to our advantage but it was a real process. Our intention was never to bring Columbus along. Our intention was to sell corned beef but it was an unexpected little victory we had with that.

The Reuben is a classic style deli sandwich. Corned beef, Swiss cheese, sauerkraut, Russian dressing and really great bread. This particular Reuben is made with corned beef from Sy Ginsberg, comes out of Detroit. We have been getting his corned beef since the day we opened, October 1st, 1984. One day, about five years ago, I sat down with Sy when he came to town and came to see me and I said, "Dude, what's your game plan for the future because you're not young anymore and neither am I?" And he said, "I got a plan. You'll get your corned beef, don't you worry about it!" Because I was so worried about not getting this corned beef. Our bread comes from Mediterra Bakery in Pittsburgh. They deliver it fresh to us daily. And we get this bread because it's the right combination of crispy, slightly chewy crust and really firm inside. It's called the crumb.

BETHIA WOLF: It's got to be able to hold all that filling without falling apart.

DIANE WARREN: Exactly. We use Emmentaler Swiss cheese - which is the original Swiss cheese that came from Switzerland thousands of years ago. And then the sauerkraut and the homemade Russian dressing. It is a mouthful of lusciousness. It just is. I was just thinking about how much corned beef we go through and it's about 26 - 30 tons a year.

Now, it may be more now because the business has been good even since I sold it. The business has stayed consistent.

I grew up in Columbus and I still remember the restaurants that my parents took me to when I was a kid. Most of them are gone. Actually, all of them are gone. And I hope that people still have that same fond memory of Katzinger's over the generations.

One of the things that has always really moved me was when we first opened we'd have these customers and they'd grow up and they'd get married and they'd bring their kids in. And then their kids would grow up and have kids and then they'd be grandparents. Generations, generations.

Some days I'd come in and see a table of like 12 people. They'd take over the dining room and push all these tables together and it would be like three generations from the original customers. And it just was so heartwarming to me that we have somehow impacted peoples' lives. I just love it. That was an unintended consequence. That was just such a joy to be able to see. Makes my heart pound. Kind of makes me tear up but yeah, that's ... I want, I want there to be a legacy of Katzinger's that has to do with the look and feel of Katzinger's, the food, the atmosphere, friendliness, the free pickles, the sense of comfort that people get when they come here.

Something someone reminded me of, and this is somewhat relevant, for some reason. She brought to my attention on September 11th we were all here when that horrible day happened. And we were so crowded that day and people just wanted to be together and talk and have some community and some sense of safety. You never think about those things. I never ever ever considered that. I was so glad to have them here and it was just a horrible day and people just wanted to be together. It was a combination of ideas and personalities and community that made Katzinger's successful.

I am Diane Warren, founder of Katzinger's Delicatessen in German Village. Please give us a visit!

[music]