

Mrs. D's restaurant has jerk chicken and much more



By Constance Scrafield

Her customer told us, "This is the best jerk chicken, pretty much the same as I had in the Islands. I come here for it all the time." This is exactly the type of accolade to keep a restaurant open. Indeed, "Mrs. D's Jerk, Rotis and Chicken" co-owned and operated by May Denhart, is celebrating five years of being in business at the Esso station on Highway 10, just north of Orangeville on the east side of the highway.

She is happy about the praise and the fact that, "everybody that gets recommended to come here, comes back."

At one point, she and her husband, Don, "gave some thought" to moving the business to their home but, quite quickly, decided to stay put.

"We have dedicated regular customers and lots of newcomers," Mrs. Denhart was pleased to say. "We decided to stay here because it's better for our customers " better for everyone."

The learning curve with what was originally a new enterprise has been "learning what the customers like best.

"Over time, we have [edited] the menu," she commented. "Everything has to be freshly cooked. I don't cook in large portions and then keep it hot " everything is fresh. So, I'm cooking all day and that's fine by me."

About her delicious jerk chicken, she told the Citizen, "Jerk chicken is seasoned with Caribbean spices. I rub it into the chicken and we bake it."

Mrs. Denhart loves the fact that everybody comes to her restaurant.

"It's such a mixture of people that come here. People come from Brampton. Lots of people come just for the cheese and the pineapple rolls," she explained. "They get shipped to California and to New York; some people came in recently and took a whole lot of orders to a pow wow."

A very busy lady rushed into the restaurant and stood ready with a list at the cash. Mrs. Denhart got up from the table where we were talking and went into the kitchen. Her husband was at the cash to hear the lady's list and pass the information on.

The customer turned to talk to us as she finished giving her order of rotis, filled with either curried goat, chicken, eggplant or chickpeas.

"Last time we were here, we took an order to Montreal," she said, laughing at it all, "then, another time to Fort Meyers. Every time we go anywhere we bring stuff from Mrs. D's. All our friends ask for it."

She went to say, "We moved up here from Brampton four years ago. Found this restaurant in the middle of nowhere and we love coming here."

While Mrs. Denhart was working in the kitchen, husband Don gave us a short tour of their personal history.

"I've known May since she was 10 years old. We lived in the same village back in Guyana, where we come from,. I went to college and became a postal worker; I was in the army and was a cop. May was the eldest of the children in her family so she did all the cooking.

"Here, May makes everything herself. She was making these pineapple and cheese buns since she was 12 years old. She did home economics at school " I don't know what that's called here. We grew up in the British system of school. Guyana got its independence in 1966."

Looking at the menu on the board across the top of the back wall, 'pholourie' was a snack we did not recognize.

Mr. Denhart was ready to define it: 'Pholourie are a snack of yellow corn meal balls. They come with a spicy mango/ tamarin dip. They are very popular in Guyana at social functions or when we get together for a beer. She's been making them for years. They are special Guyanese snacks.'

Sold several at a time in a pack, the pholouries come with the dip separately in a little container. Yum.

A sign outside offers sandwiches as a quick take-away but, as Mr. Denhart suggested, 'She makes sandwiches but they're freshly made. We don't pre-make them. It's the better way.'

With a family in the food industry as butchers and growing produce themselves to sell at markets in Guyana, Mrs. Denhart agrees that her life's history has been tied up with cooking. 'I'm good at what I do,' she confirmed simply. 'I've always excelled at it. I taste it, I cook it. This is what I like to do.'

While it might not be surprising that Mrs. Denhart does catering, her flexibility about the numbers is interesting: 'We did a wedding for 1,500 people last year,' she informed us. 'We cooked the food here and took it to the hotel where the wedding was. Small or large. It doesn't matter what size, I take it on, even at the last minute.'

All the curries in the rotis are served as well as full meals with rice and trimmings. The restaurant is clean and pleasant and the humour is charming.

'Our customer support base is really wonderful,' said Mrs. Denhart. 'We don't keep people waiting because we're so organized. My sister, sometimes, or my daughter come to help at the cash. People stop here coming from Toronto on their way to the cottage. So far we haven't taken much holiday because I wanted build up my business. People come here from Guelph and Owen Sound, too.'

'I like doing this the most. I enjoy being with my customers.'

She said, 'I enjoy every moment of it.'

For take-away and other inquiries, call 519-942-4326.