

# A Country Tea Room well worth your Thyme

**H**ow often does your food look as good as it tastes? When was the last time you ate a meal made from scratch? A unique tea room in eastern Illinois can make all this, and more, possible. Since opening in March of 1995, Country Thyme Tea Room &



Above: Bonnie creates sophisticated set-ups for weddings and other formal occasions she caters. The bride and groom carved in the watermelon is just one of her special touches. Left: Bonnie Kaeb shows President/CEO Wm. David Champion, Jr. the attractive table settings she prepares for her customers.



Catering in Paxton has grown steadily into a large-scale catering service and eatery, well-known for its exquisite catering and unique food display. Owner Bonnie Kaeb, an Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative (EIEC) member attributes her success to a love of cooking, the gift to do it well, her husband's encouragement and her faith in God."

"I enjoy sharing and using my gift of cooking," Bonnie says. Her growing business has brought



Jeannie Kingston, manager of administrative services, center, enjoys lunch at the Tea Room with Pat Nelson (left) and Becky Burklund (right), both Eastern Illini members.

about a very busy schedule. "It's hard to say no to people," she says with a smile.

Country Thyme Tea Room and Catering caters for all types of functions, from picnics in the park, to elegant, sit-down dinners. Bonnie is willing to travel throughout Illinois and parts of Indiana. Box lunches can be ordered for seminars or family gatherings. Deli trays, with meats, cheeses, vegetables, fruits and desserts, are also available. Home-cooked meals can even be delivered to your home for special occasions or family dinners.

Bonnie makes everything from scratch because that is the way she learned how to cook. Not only does her cooking taste great, but it's also presented beautifully. "I guess what draws people in is the appearance. I really haven't seen anyone do a food arrangement the way we do," she says. An example of Bonnie's creativity is a bride and groom carved into a watermelon for a wedding reception.

While Bonnie does most of the cooking, she also employs 12 people ranging from high school students to at-home moms. Though her staff is mainly women, Bonnie's husband is her greatest help. "He is my biggest source of encouragement. Bonnie's daughter-in-law Shelly and 4-year-old granddaughter Sheyenne also work with her. "Sheyenne is our little mascot. Every now and then she'll put on an apron and follow her mom around. The customers love her, especially the older ladies," Bonnie says.

Country Thyme Tea Room serves lunch Tuesday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and many EIEC members are regular customers. "We have a tremendous repeat clientele. Word of mouth has been one of our best advertisers," says Bonnie. "We give free samples

of some of the new foods we are trying. We recently gave out little cups of a fruit soup that went over very well."

The idea for fruit soup came from a national food show that Bonnie attended in Chicago. "It was an interesting food show because all of the international foods were displayed. I know I can't always do that type of food here, but I can incorporate some if it into what we currently make," she says. Bonnie has found that the key to success is introducing a new food slowly and in small quantities. "We give customers a little taste and explain what the new food is. That way when it appears on the menu, they're ready to try it."

Another unique idea used by Country Thyme Tea Room is that each entrée offered at lunch time is not repeated for at least 30 days. "People can come back several times a month and not have the same entrée," Bonnie says. A popular lunch combination is half a sandwich, choice of soup or salad and a taste of dessert. Many people like that it includes a little bit of everything.

"We have also been doing a lot of fax orders lately. Several businesses and nursing home employees will fax their orders in the morning and pick them up at 11 a.m. This has been working out very well," says Bonnie. Yet another option is to call in, place a lunch order and have it waiting on the table



Sheyenne, the Tea Room's "mascot" helps her grandmother at the Tea Room, and keeps many of the customers entertained.

when you arrive. "It allows people to have the full hour to relax and enjoy their meal. They don't have to waste time ordering and waiting on their food," she says.

Country Thyme Tea Room can accommodate evening groups up to 80 people through reservations. Such groups have usually included business meetings, employee parties, church seminars, bridal showers and rehearsal dinners.

Bonnie also welcomes several playing card groups that come in for lunch and stay through the afternoon. "The players can just come in, enjoy their lunch together, visit and play cards. It's an outing for them and that's why we are here. It's how we make our customers happy," Bonnie says.

Country Thyme Tea Room & Catering is located at 124 W. State in Paxton, IL. New customers are always welcomed and reservations are encouraged. Bonnie can be reached at (217) 379-4800 or (217) 379-4707.