

(Local flavor)





Pam and Penny Hawks



PENNY'S PANTRY

BY CHELLE ELLIS / PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANA FINIMORE

THE BRIDGE LADIES CHATTED AND ATE and laughed. And they played hot games of bridge, cards flying across their usual table at Penny's Pantry. It's a ritual repeated every Tuesday at the popular Senatobia eatery.

"We have a wonderful lunch and get to play bridge," declared Mary Carolyn Tindall, one of the five Bridge Ladies. Tindall reported the Pantry's soups are some of the group's favorites.

"The creamy onion," promised Tindall, "is just wonderful and the shrimp bisque is especially good. And the chicken salad is Northwest Mississippi-renowned."

The ladies played cards through the afternoon, likely unaware their visit fell on a Penny's Pantry anniversary.

The hustle of kitchen and counter staff seemed routine on November 15, compared to the next eight days that

would lead to Thanksgiving Day. The mid-November date marked five years that Penny's Pantry has fed Senatobians with its cuisine on holidays and on just plain days.


"Having our anniversary this close to Thanksgiving doesn't give us much time to celebrate," Penny Hawks said. Her "eager-yet-nervous" tone was characteristic of the way some business owners welcome high volumes of traffic.

"Seventy-five percent of our business comes from the holiday meals we prepare in November and December."

Cooking more than 100 Thanksgiving Day meals would surely stretch the patience of any cook. But stressful schedules are second nature to Hawks, who left her aviation career as a pilot to open the café with her sister, Pam Hawks.

As children, they saw their parents, Johnny and Marion

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Hawks, run the Coldwater Café. The transition seemed natural.

"The women in our family are known as terrific cooks and my grandmother was known well for her signature old-fashioned chocolate pie," Penny Hawks boasted.

The girls credit their grandmother, Mary Hawks, and aunt, Juanita Walden, for the inspiration and source of most of their downhome recipes.

"When I was 13 or 14 my aunt gave me a cookbook called 'My Favorites' and I loaded it up with her recipes, such as her white wine cake," Penny Hawks remembered. "We still use that cookbook today."

In the autumn of 2000, the sisters opened the business in 400 square feet of space with one picnic table for seating. Back then, they prepared four quarts of soup and a family-size package of chicken per day.

Today they operate in 3,000 square feet - furnished with antiques - serving 32 quarts of soup and 40 pounds of chicken daily.

"When I was a child, my mother passed away and I lived with my grandmother, who taught me to cook. She was thrilled when we decided to go into business and became my first employee," Hawks fondly recalled. "We started out together making tiny quantities of food which have gradually grown into larger ones."

Her grandmother passed away four months ago, but the business is still as much a family affair as ever, recruiting the assistance of their father and stepmother, Patsy Hawks, when the holiday orders start coming in.

After the rush of the holidays, Penny's Pantry returns to its usual routine of serving lunch and preparing ready-to-bake dinners. Customers can call in and order meals to take home or choose from a variety of casseroles displayed in two large refrigerated cabinets near the front door.

Serving soups, sandwiches, side salads and a fresh-baked dessert each weekday, the diner daily draws a steady lunch crowd. More than 100 customers take a break from work and succumb to the Pantry's home-style recipes and quaint atmosphere.

Choosing between the chicken salad sandwich with pasta salad or the egg-and-olive sandwich with potato salad, among others, proves to be a tough decision. Luckily, it's the only effort you'll need to put forth with the Pantry's attentive staff at your service.

"We serve home-style food that people eat every day. We prepare 240 pounds of boneless, skinless chicken breast for our homemade recipes every week," Hawks explained.

Penny's Pantry has found much support among Senatobia residents, like "The Bridge Ladies," as they are known. They enjoy the card games and the sisterly company of good friends as they dine.

Penny Hawks smiled: "I always envisioned the smells of good food coming from the kitchen with the sound of ladies laughing in the background. The Bridge Ladies have helped make my dream a reality."

Penny's Pantry is open Monday through Friday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m., at 136 N. Front St. or contacted at 662.562.5570. Lunch is served from 10:00 a.m.-2 p.m. ■