



Tar Heel Tastes

Yancey House

Lucindy and Michael Willis serve fresh, seasonal gourmet food in one of the state's most historic homes.

BY CHRIS GIGLEY

Guests who travel to the Yancey House Restaurant and Gallery for brunch, lunch, or dinner will likely leave satisfied, and not just because of the wonderful food. Located in a historic home, it's one of those places that travelers feel

lucky to have discovered.

"We like to say we're in the middle of nowhere but close to everything," says chef Lucindy Willis, who's also the owner along with her husband, Michael.

When the restaurant opened in 2005 in Yanceyville on

U.S. Highway 158, it immediately drew customers from Reidsville, Roxboro, and Danville, Virginia, just 14 miles to the north. Now it attracts just as many people from the Triad and the Triangle areas, each of which is about an hour drive away.

"We had a kickoff advertising



The Federalist-style cottage that houses the restaurant was originally owned by Bartlett Yancey Jr., a popular congressman in the early 19th century.

PHOTOGRAPHY (THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE) BY DAN ROUTH

budget ... and haven't spent a penny of it," says Michael. "Everything we've gotten has been word of mouth, which is the best kind of advertising there is."

Guests come from all over to enjoy the creations of a woman who has a Ph.D. in English. Lucindy taught at Elon University, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and North Carolina State University before she took early retirement in 2005 to become a full-time chef.

"I miss the students ... but I don't miss grading papers," she says. "I also like the immediate gratification I get as a chef. Students don't really appreciate you while they're taking your classes. You might get a letter or a phone call several years later. But here, I can walk into the dining room and get instant feedback."

And that feedback is always positive.

In season

The Yancey House menu changes quarterly and features many ingredients grown on local farms. Lucindy also keeps an herb garden right outside her kitchen door.

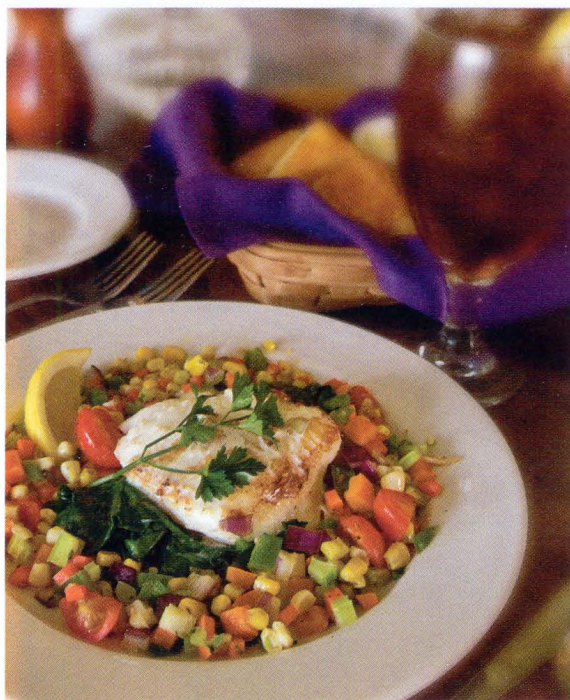
"When you use fresh ingredients, the food is going to taste better," says Michael.

And because the Willises are bound by the seasonality of local crops, certain menu items take on a special urgency. They buy tender stalks of asparagus from a farmer down the road, for instance, but only after Easter when the crops are at their peak.

The same goes for strawberries. Savvy regulars know to call ahead in

the summer to ask about Lucindy's strawberry shortcake, which stays on the menu only for the two- to three-week period when local strawberries are big and flavorful.

The Willises are devoted to good food. Lucindy arrives at the restaurant at 7 o'clock every morning



Signature dishes like sea bass with Southwest vegetables are prepared with tender, loving care using only the finest ingredients.

to prepare the sauces and desserts for the day. Michael seasons Texas brisket the night before, then slow cooks it for nine hours the following day to give the meat maximum tenderness.

The brisket is popular, but Lucindy says the most requested entree is her catfish en papillote, which comes with crab, shrimp, and a decadent creole cream mushroom sauce. Most guests follow that with bread pudding, which has a creative twist Lucindy stumbled upon shortly after opening the restaurant.

"We started serving sweet potato

rolls and kept them in a warmer," she explains. "By the end of the night, we had leftovers that were dried out and obviously couldn't be served. But they were perfect for bread pudding, and they already had a nice cinnamon flavor."

The rolls lend a rich and dense texture to the dessert, which gets better with every bite. Just as she thought, the cinnamon from the rolls mingles with the Jack Daniel's custard sauce, taking the flavor to an entirely new level. Carbohydrates have never been more worthwhile.

The catfish, bread pudding, and other menu items pay homage to Lucindy's upbringing in Shreveport, Louisiana, where feeding large groups of people was an everyday affair at the family home. Working in that kitchen was all the culinary background she needed to transition smoothly from academia to food.

"I wasn't afraid of this job or working in a commercial kitchen," says Lucindy. "It came naturally to me."

Working in a place like the Yancey House also helps. She says she doesn't feel like a restaurant chef there. The home's cozy environs make her feel as if she's back home in Shreveport, cooking for a large group of friends and family.

"I think it has an effect on the people who eat here, too," she says. "They feel like guests in someone's home instead of customers. They're more comfortable and forgiving."

But there's nothing for them to forgive. Not only is the food excellent, but the service is top-notch.

"We want people to sit down and not worry," says Lucindy. "They



shouldn't have to ask for more water or bread or anything else. For our staff, it's a psychological thing. They need to be able to read our customers and anticipate what they want."

Educational meal

Diners are captivated by the Yancey House Restaurant before they take a single bite of Lucindy's food. From the road, they see a house that looks bright purple when the sun hits it just so.

"The color is actually Knoxville gray," says Michael. "It's a Greek

Cooking for large groups during her childhood gave chef and owner Lucindy Willis all the training she needed to transform herself from professor to chef.

Revival color that's historically consistent with the times."

A roadside marker announces the historical significance of the home. It originally belonged to Bartlett Yancey Jr., the man for whom the county seat is named. Yancey was a dynamic personality who made his fortune as a lawyer and tobacco farmer in the early 19th century and earned fame as one of the most popular congressmen of his time. Had Yancey not died in 1828 at age 42, Michael theorizes that he would have been elected governor.

Yancey knew the house as a modest Federalist-style cottage, which visitors can still make out from the side parking lot. Michael, who is constantly gathering new details on the house and the Yancey family, says