

PEASANT:

By Ellen Berman

Probably no two restaurateurs have contributed more creatively or more successfully to Atlanta's gourmet dining boom than Steve Nygren and Dick Dailey. Seven years ago they renovated a run-down building in a somewhat deteriorated location, and with the \$25,000 they borrowed, opened what has become one of the most highly regarded restaurants in Georgia. Indeed, the Peasant has evolved as the beloved standby of both local yokels and regular out-of-town visitors alike.

Reassured by the quickly surging popularity this original Peasant achieved as word spread about its intimate atmosphere, high-quality country French menu and modest prices, Nygren (who had resigned as National Sales Director for Stouffer's) and Dailey (who had resigned as training Director of Neiman Marcus), opened The Peasant Uptown a year later. The Phipps Plaza location generated sales almost 3 times that of its predecessor.

With the restoration of an old village store in Roswell, the 3rd of the Peasant restaurants opened in 1976: The Public House. It became a significant feature of the revitalization of Historic Roswell's central business district.

The next two years saw forays into the fast-food business. Nygren, who serves on the Board of the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau, and Dailey, opened the "Park" restaurants, at Phipps and Colony Square. Though technically operating as self-service cafeterias, the Parks nevertheless sustained the table service quality which had distinguished the previous three.

The largest and latest venture of the Peasant, Incorporated. The Country Place, opened in 1978. The literally hundreds of job applicants who vied for positions there, waiting to be interviewed and scrutinized by the most demanding recruitment squad in the restaurant business, attests to the eminent reputation and prestige that the Peasants had achieved.

Fortunately for both owners and customers, the 7-plus million dollar business is unaffected by the "quit while you're ahead" syndrome. With over 800 employees already serving over one million meals a year, the Peasant plans to open its first out-of-state restaurant in Nashville, as soon as the "right" location is found.

Far from succumbing to the mediocrity and monotonous uniformity of other "chains," each of the Peasants maintains a unique ambience and style. The key to keeping alive the indefatigable Peasant image is their 5-part formula: food, service, decor, consistency, and price. Says Public Relations Director Pat Bernstein, "The managers agonize over any possible changes that suggest a variance in that image. We keep prices down as low as possible; the decor is tasteful but not too elegant; all the food is a variation on a country French theme—very hearty, large portions. And we're very meticulous about the ingredients. If we can't get just the right kind of cheese for our famous onion soup, for instance, we just don't serve it."

At first, menus consisted of employees' contributions. Now, to be consistent throughout the chain, however, the Peasant employs a Food Service Director and, most recently, a Research and Development Director who oversees menu development.

the formula seems to have worked: 86 percent of their American Express business sales are from repeat business.

Dailey defines the Peasant image as "more of a feeling than anything else. We've spent years getting the employee department internally organized with the personnel and management departments. In hiring, we look only for those employees who are unobtrusive, younger, and nice-looking, with good personalities. We want to know how they deal with the public, so there's no getting involved in the negative aspects of restauranting.

"We've hired a staff of very vibrant, young, energetic people. We work very hard at that." Staff training is rigorous, which, besides on-the-job training, includes classes and seminars. They cover a wide range of topics, from public relations to nutrition. Thus it is logical that they prefer to promote from within.

The high standards that so many Atlantans—and others—have come to appreciate stems from, according to Dailey, "a consistency in making sure you're the best, staying on top of everything. Both myself and Steve are very sensitive to anything that's not absolutely first rate. We want to give people something that's true and honest." The hardest part of restaurant management, he says, is "staying on top of it all. Most people in the restaurant business are fairly fickle. But you have to make sure the prices are competitive without sacrificing quality. You have to stay on top of the business, because you're dealing directly with the public; it's an instantaneous task."

When asked what he found most desirable about the business, Dailey indicated his pleasure in satisfying the public—especially Atlantans—who are "proud" of the Peasant's reputation.

Still, numerous celebrities dine at the Peasant when they are in town—including Craig Stevens, Alexis Smith, and Jim Nabors (Gomer Pyle), who is a "good friend" of the place. Frequent local patronage consists of an array of politicians, musicians, actors, and entertainers.

As the corporation expands, the owners worry about bigness, and how to retain a cozy, family-like attitude among both employees and customers. They would like to be able to be friendly with everybody. But, as long as customers continue to enjoy the sophisticated informality that is the Peasant trademark, they shouldn't have too much to worry about.