

A photograph of Clark and Juanita Shaw standing in their store, the Old Country Store. Clark is on the right, wearing a red shirt and glasses, and Juanita is on the left, wearing a dark top. The store is filled with various items, including jars, bottles, and framed pictures on the walls.

Putting the Old Country Store (and Jackson) on the Map

Clark and Juanita Shaw

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PAUL KNIPPLE

To the cynical mind, the Old Country Store Restaurant and Casey Jones Village in Jackson, Tennessee, might seem like nothing more than a massive corporate undertaking. The company has advertising along the interstate and a huge volume of business. Surely such success must be driven by corporate interests. Admittedly, the enterprise is a corporation, but at heart, it has always been about family.

“We are a family business, and that’s what I hope comes through with everything we do,” says Clark Shaw, CEO and son of Brooks Shaw, the founder of the Old Country Store. “We made a decision many years ago that it wasn’t about the almighty dollar. Through the years we’ve had all sorts of opportunities all over the country. We decided to focus our time and energy here and develop this into the best it can be.”

With all the growth and success of the Old Country Store, it is ironic that its origins are in loss. Brooks Shaw’s first job was in a small country store where he earned (as the story

goes) “50 cents a day and all the hoop cheese he could eat.” He rose to success as president of Kelly Foods, but a heart attack at age 32 forced him to slow down a bit. When his doctor suggested he take up a hobby, he never imagined that hobby would change the course of his life.

“He recognized that these little country stores were going away. That’s what started this business. He started collecting those antiques,” says Clark’s wife, Juanita, of her late father-in-law, who passed away in 1971 at the age of 46. The Old Country Store is decorated with antiques from his collection, and now Casey Jones Village has another reminder of the origins of the family business. The original store building that Brooks Shaw first worked in has been moved to the grounds and is being restored. The grounds are also landscaped with all native Tennessee plants.

“The goal for the whole village is that, when someone drives up and they want to see what Tennessee is like, if this is the only place they get to visit, they’re going to feel like they’ve been to the South,” says Juanita. Repr-

senting the South in its best light is just one of many causes that the Shaws support. “We recognize...that one day what we have could be gone. One of the great things about the South is the food. We’re trying to hold on to that and provide that for others to experience,” says Juanita

A unique part of the Southern culinary experience is chitlins. Not everyone loves the dish, but many were willing to drive in from far and wide for a series of chitlin suppers. At the final supper, folks polished off one ton of the cleaned and cooked pork intestines.

But a dish that pretty much everyone can agree on is the Old Country Store’s specialty—cracklin’ cornbread. Think pancakes, only a million times better—soft and buttery, but with more substance because they’re made with cornmeal. Then, to top it off, they are laced with pieces of cracklins—small pieces of fried pork skin—to add the perfect touch of pork and make them a true delicacy. In a recent article in *Garden and Gun* magazine, John T. Edge called them one of the

100 things to eat in the South before you die. He was right.

As he prepares cracklin' cornbread for the lunch buffet, restaurant employee Alexander Maholmes is proud to be part of the experience. "I love cooking here. I love to feed the people and send them home happy. I go home at night happy because of that," he says. And Alexander does make a lot of people happy—the restaurant feeds a tremendous number of people every day.

"We have several hundred tour groups come through the village annually," says Clark Shaw. "We serve thousands of Europeans. They stop for lunch a lot of the time because the tour operators want them to experience the South and Southern food."

Dorette Davis, a guide leading a group of Austrian music lovers, says that the Old Country Store is ideal for travelers. "They have the best variety of Southern food, plus many Europeans have never seen an all-you-can-eat buffet," she says.

The recipes preserve local food traditions, but a large buffet perhaps isn't the best setting for following ideas such as local and organic food. The restaurant is making every effort, though.

"Obviously it's very difficult for us with the volume we do, but any time we can get it, we buy local produce," says Juanita Shaw.

T. J. Ross works as a cashier and server at the restaurant three to four days a week, but he is truly a farmer. "My father and grandfather were farmers. I love it," he says. Ross is one of several local farmers who will be selling their produce to the restaurant.

The business that was born out of the decline of the country store is also doing its part to help another important part of Southern food—the small-town restaurant. The best way to save a restaurant is to send it business, so the Shaws applied what they know about culinary tourism and came up with a way to get people off the beaten path and into these unique places. "We created a culinary tourism map showing what is so special about west Tennessee and its food. So many people come to the restaurant, that we're the gateway to what is here," says Juanita.

"We love to drive out to these communities and eat in these little small town restaurants. And the food is so good, but they're so small. They don't have the time or resources to promote themselves, so we said what if this map could help them?" says Clark.

Clark's sister, Deborah Shaw Laman is vice president and marketing director for Casey Jones Village. In addition to her work for the family business, Deborah lends her skills to community causes as well. She worked on putting together the west Tennessee Culinary Tourism map, and she is a board member of

Slow Food Memphis. Deborah has also taken on another marketing project, working with the Jackson Farmers' Market to help spread their message and bring them success.

For all their far-reaching efforts, the mission of the folks at Casey Jones Village ultimately comes back to one simple thing: food—shared at the family table. "It's such a special time when family gathers around food. That's where the children learn so much. Not just how to cook, but they learn the history of the family," says Juanita.

Sitting in a room decorated with antiques collected by his father, sitting with his wife and sister, sitting with his son, Clark Shaw keeps himself connected to both the past and future of his family. And his family's work will keep many connected to the best traditions of the South and Southern food. *eM*

Brooks Shaw's Old Country Store at Casey Jones Village

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Once upon a time Paul Knipple was very skinny. Then he tried cracklin' cornbread. You can keep up with his expanding...um... horizons at www.paulandangela.net.

Opposite: Juanita and Clark Shaw; Below: Cracklin' Cornbread and the Culinary Tourism Map (you can print a copy from www.caseyjones.com)

