

A Profile of Ken Young

Most everybody in Durham has enjoyed eating at Young's Restaurant, Durham's oldest restaurant, occasionally or on a regular basis. We are pleased to share this profile of proprietor Ken Young, the man behind the scene.

Jack Grant opened Grant's Café in the old Pettee Block Building (at the northwest corner of Main Street and Jenkins Court, now demolished) in 1916. A few years later he built a new restaurant on the present site. In 1968, Dick and Annette Young bought the business which became Young's Restaurant and Coffee Shop. Ken worked in his parents' establishment as a teenager and has run it since 1990, when his father retired. He and his wife Cathy strive for "a friendly atmosphere where student, 'Townie,' and stranger come together daily to eat and socialize."

About ten years ago, a customer left a note for Ken asking why he was not using more local food. He thought, "What the devil is this person talking about?" People usually don't give their name when they leave a comment but Diana Carroll did. Ken called her and they talked for about four hours one morning in the dining room. The conversation changed him.

Now most of the vegetables served at Young's (during the warmer months) are grown in Ken's own commercial greenhouse at his home in Dover.

He cultivates three kinds of vegetables in the greenhouse. The *root vegetables* - carrots, onions, and beets - love the cold so he plants them early. Tomatoes, green peppers, Thai peppers, jalapenos, and basil are started as *seedlings* in his house and transplanted to the greenhouse when they reach 6-10 inches in height. Kale, arugula, baby romaine, his salad mix, and tatsoi and mizuna (Asian greens) are *direct seed*, going right into the ground.

The plants are watered precisely with drip irrigation. In the summer when the temperature reaches 75 degrees the sides of the greenhouse automatically start to roll up to let in air and cool down the interior.

Ken also grows summer squash, butternut squash, zucchini, and broccoli along with blueberries and raspberries in his outdoor garden (hence the fine raspberry vinaigrette dressing). Everything goes to the restaurant. He follows organic principles and does not use any pesticides, which is challenging because the bugs are persistent.

Vegetables from Ken's place are only a few days old when they are served. In the winter, distributors for many restaurants and stores, including Young's, get their produce from markets in Boston. If something is shipped from California, for example, it might be 10-12 days old when it reaches Boston.

The produce is still very good but discerning foodies, like Diana and her husband John Carroll, a retired UNH professor and author of numerous books related to agriculture, can tell the difference. These customers ask, “When is Kenny getting his greens in?” They are not complaining; they just look forward to savoring his farm-to-table produce.

Ken is proud of his sustainable practices. He buys wind energy credits for all of his electrical use, his main food supplier is wind-powered and uses bio-diesel in their trucks, and he has implemented numerous energy-efficient measures in the restaurant, earning certification as an Environmental Champion from the New Hampshire Sustainable Lodging & Restaurant Program.

When Ken is not in the kitchen (He has worked as a full time cook at Young’s for 43 years!), running the restaurant, or tending the greenhouse, there is a good chance he is climbing a mountain. He has hiked all 48 of New Hampshire’s 4,000 footers and is now more than half way through the Seven Summits which comprise the highest peak on each continent. Ken has scaled 22,841-foot Aconcagua on the border of Chile and Argentina (the world’s tallest outside of the Himalayas); Kilimanjaro, the 19,341-foot dormant volcano in Tanzania; Elbrus, another dormant volcano in the Caucasus range (at 18,510 feet); and 20,310-foot Denali in Alaska (formerly called Mt. McKinley). He was struck by the remarkable beauty of Denali with its flowing glaciers, as well as its minus-30 degree temperatures, frequent avalanches, and 100 mph winds.

Ken says, “I love the challenge and exhilaration of being in the mountains...I’ve met great people, both among the climbers and among the local people [who] provide great lessons in appreciating what they have as well as appreciating the beauty and value of our natural resources...[The] experiences always remind me that we need to do the same in our lives here at home as well.”

Young’s employs around 18 people (six full time). Ken notes how the business has changed over time. Durham has always been a college town but there were more blue-collar workers in the 1960s and 70s. Young’s used to have a counter with 15 seats. It was packed with workers at 5:30 in the morning. He didn’t know then what an avocado was but he now offers Tuscan vegan toast, chorizo sausage, pesto hollandaise sauce, roasted-corn salsa, and, of course, a home-made veggie burger. But some things don’t change. People still love bacon and eggs, buttermilk biscuits, and home fries.

While catering to a wide spectrum of customers, Ken tries to keep it simple. He has the management part down after all these years but notes that in the kitchen you can’t ever have a bad day. That would be reflected in the food. He is working harder now than he would like at his age but will keep on doing it as long as he is healthy. Maybe after conquering the remaining three peaks (including Everest!) Ken will slow down a little.