

Featured Customer: Warren's Lobster House

Interview with Scott and Brad Cunningham

This quarter, I had the opportunity to sit down with Scott and Brad Cunningham from Warren's Lobster House. Located on the Piscataqua River in Kittery Maine, Warren's has been a Kittery Icon for the last 70 years. Featuring a well-known and popular salad bar and full-service open-air deck, it has been and continues to be a local favorite.

Brad and Scott, tell me a little bit about the history of Warrens:

Warrens was established in 1940 by Warren "Pete" Wurm. At the time, it was a six-stool clam and lobster stand on the Maine banks of the Piscataqua. Be-

today. For example, the parking lot that exists today was a river originally with just a plank out that went out to the 2-story building that represented Warren's at the time. Pete Wurm, Warren's owner at the time, had a brother who was a warden out at the Navy prison. When Pete needed help with the parking lot, his brother brought over prisoners who then helped to fill in the river and create the parking lot that we have today. The main buildings are today, as they always have been, on pylons. But, the parking lot was created on fill dirt.

Scott, how long has your family been involved with this restaurant?



tween 1940 and 1955, there were many many renovations and expansions made, most of which created what you see here today. Warren's Lobster House is now a 350-seat restaurant, bakery, lobster pound, gift shop, lounge and 200-foot boat dock. The additions made since 1955 are the solarium and the seasonal 80-seat deck, which were added in the 90's.

There is a lot of history here, not only in what the building has become, but how it got to be what it is

I originally became involved with Warrens in 1984. At the time, my business partner, David Mickee, and I were looking for something different to do. We were both in the foodservice industry in Manchester NH, and thought the Warren's venture would be a great change of pace for us. David and I worked together in the restaurant until 2006 when David decided to retire. At that time, the Cunningham family officially bought him out. Today, it is myself (Scott), my wife Claudia, and our children, Brad, and Colleen

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MacDonald.

70 Years is a long time for a restaurant. What's your secret?

Number one, our pricing is reasonable. We offer quality product at good pricing and people recognize and respect that. The salad bar has a great reputation and is a big draw. Number two, we have been very aggressive with our advertising and finding new ways to bring in new customers.

We also have a frequent dining program that has been very successful for us. We have about 2500 active members (customers who spend \$100 or more per year), and we communicate with them frequently through our quarterly newsletter. We've had it in place for over the

20 years, and it's one of the best things we ever did. While everyone has a program like it now, we were one of the first to do it and we've benefited from it for many, many years.

We also work with local area hotels. We provide them with coupons to the hotels that they can give to patrons looking for a place to eat. 3-4 years ago, we tied an incentive to the program that gives the hotels credit for the number of coupons redeemed. In fact, we have one hotel that sends over so many customers, they were able to pay for their entire employee Christmas Party using their credits.

Lastly, we deliver Christmas cookies each season to local area businesses that are responsible for sending customers our way. We appreciate those partnerships and enjoy paying these folks back for their support.

How are you folks celebrating 70 years?

We have an "Open House" Birthday Party each year in March, a tradition started in the late 80's. Originally created to say thank to our customers and help generate business during a slow period, it is a very popular event. Typically running for 3 days, it is extremely popular and well known event. This year, we expanded it to 4 days, to allow us to recognize the four families who have owned Warrens – the Wurm Family, the Anton and Assad Families, and Mickee Family, and the Cunninghams. We offered 2 for 1 deals on everything after 4pm other than alcohol and had prizes, drawings, etc.

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What are the biggest challenges you have faced?

Stay fresh. It’s a challenge to keep on the leading edge, but you have to. We’ve done 2 for 1’s when things are really slow, and we began offering a \$1 menu during the winter months a couple of years ago. We offered a select number of items for \$1 with the purchase of a salad bar. We focused on value cost items that would allow us to do this and still maintain a reasonable food cost. It was hugely popular and we look forward to future ventures like these.

What are you most proud of as you look back on the years?

We are most proud of being a “family” business. We don’t limit that description to family by blood either. Yes, we have Mom, Dad, and 2 Kids as ownership, but our “family” is made up of our management team and employees as well. We spend so much time together, but we are able to keep business as business and personal issues as personal. No one acts in a selfish manner ever – we do what is best for the business and don’t let pride or personal desires get in the way of succeeding.

Any advice for other restaurant owners?

Be involved. There are plenty of restaurants where ownership is not present and thus is out of touch with what is needed for their restaurant and the customers they serve or wish to serve. We have family/ownership on the floor all the time, and we know what is happening. In addition, we have fantastic managers, many who have been here for decades, who have helped make it possible for us to do what we have done. They appreciate our presence and we appreciate the comfort their presence brings to us.

Also, establish a structure and procedures to support your day to day business. You can’t do everything yourself, so employ qualified people who follow procedures you put in place and give yourself some freedom to remain strategic, and focus on the big picture.



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