

Togetherness on menu

Table Hopping

STEVE BARNES



Members of Dinner Party of Eight, seen at Crossroads Brewing in Catskill, marked their 200th monthly dinner in July.



Members of the Dinner Party of Eight enjoyed their 200th monthly dinner at New York Restaurant in Catskill in July.

In a remarkable testament to the power of food and friendship, a group of Greene County couples has dined together monthly for almost 17 years.

Known as Dinner Party of Eight, or DP8 for short, the group celebrated its 200th consecutive outing a few weeks ago with drinks at Crossroads Brewing followed by dinner at New York Restaurant, both in Catskill.

“We get along so well, and the conversation just flows,” says Don Teator, who, with his wife, Debra, is one of the founding couples of DP8. He says, “We have our differences that come up sometimes, but the rewards more than outweigh them.”

Not all 200 dinners have been attended by the same eight people. In fact, only two of them — Don Teator and co-founder Tom Karnes — have been to every one. Outside commitments, illness, a founding couple retiring to Florida, another who winters in the Sunshine State: Various factors prompt three substitute couples, who have been to “only” 10 or so dinners apiece, to get invited, or very occasionally the number hasn’t been a full eight, but the group remains a monthly fixture. In total, 16 people have membership in DP8, ranging in age from early 60s to early 70s. Absent the emeritus couple who live in Florida, eight go to dinner every month, 14 meet for a cookout at one of their homes once during the summer, and the full membership shows up for their December gathering, always at the Karnes’ house.

The group’s first dinner, in November 2002, was at Millrock restaurant in Windham, then in its sixth year of business; Millrock is now 23 years old. Between that and their visit to New York Restaurant last month, DP8 has been to about 120 eateries in eight New York counties and one in South Carolina, during a group vacation. According to meticulous records kept by Don Teator, who is the group’s historian and also the town historian for Greenville, a handful of restaurants have been visited several times, and one, Mountain View Brasserie in Greenville, has been the site of a DP8 dinner 13 times, because it is a favorite destination and is also convenient to the group members’ Greene County homes.

“It’s amazing that we’ve kept it going, but it’s so much fun, and it’s come to mean a lot to us,” says Karnes, a co-founder along with his wife, Debbie. When he commits to something, Tom Karnes sticks to it: He says he has been married for 38 years, taught school for 32 and coached baseball for 30, so he jokes that almost 17 years’ worth of going out to dinner is a comparatively brief commitment.

“I guess when I start things, I keep doing them,” he says.

“We’ve actually been married for 37 years,” corrects Debbie Karnes with a laugh, “but I can’t hold that against him, because I’m usually the one who makes that mistake.”

Tradition dictates a different couple picks each month’s destination and leads the drive to the restaurant; the others don’t know until they arrive. The next day, Don Teator sends out an email soliciting individual reactions to the meal, which he assembles into an overview and distributes via email. Participants also rate the meal, on a 0 to 8 scale (because there are eight people). No restaurant has received a perfect score. The highest, a 7.75, went to the American Hotel in Sharon Springs, where DP8 has been twice. Next in line are The Bears’ Steakhouse in Duanesburg, at 7.6, and the much-visited Mountain View Brasserie, earning 7.5. The lowest score, 3.5, went to a place, Teator says, that is long out of business but about which the person who chose it is still embarrassed a decade later.

Joyce and Mark Notarnicola started as dining substitutes six or seven years ago, becoming full-time DP8ers a few years back.

“Since we’re averaging everybody’s scores, I don’t think an 8 will ever be possible,” says Joyce Notarnicola. “Except the yearly Christmas dinner at the Karneses. That’s our perfect 8.”

The group has seven formal rules, long codified, and others that are unwritten but equally important to be followed.

Written rules include the destination restaurant being within an hour’s drive and less than \$75 per person in total cost; exceptions must be agreed upon in advance. Alcohol or BYOB must be available. And independently owned restaurants are strongly preferred; for a chain to be considered, it must have no more than two locations within the group’s driving radius.

One person has his own rule: “Ken must have coffee.”

Generally described as the group’s man of few words, Ken Monteverd — with his wife, Kriss, a founding member of DP8 — is voluble about his preferred beverage.

“I’ve gotta have my coffee, and it’s gotta keep coming throughout the meal,” says Ken Monteverd.

Marvels Tom Karnes, “I’ve never had coffee in my life, and he must get six or seven refills during the meal.”

Among the unwritten rules: no mention of politics, religion or the Vietnam War during dinner.

“I served in ... Vietnam,” says Ken Monteverd. “It’s just something you don’t need to talk about.”

Don Teator says he believes the Donald Trump dividing line goes down the middle of the group, as it does the country at large, “But we don’t want to get anyone’s blood boiling, so we don’t talk about it.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard an argument of any kind at that table,” says Kerry Quinn, who with his wife, Julie, is a substitute for DP8, having attended about 10 dinners. “Everybody just talks about all sorts of things, except what they don’t talk about.”

Food and restaurant dining is a frequent topic of conversation.

“We’re there to have a good time and catch up,” says Debbie Karnes. “But if

something is lacking — it's usually the service — we definitely do notice.” Members agree the group as a whole tends toward conservative food preferences, with the more adventurous palates opting for interesting daily features while their companions usually order steak or Italian. Thus another written rule: “Food aversions are to be considered — curry, salmon, Mexican, and wild game.”

More than half of DP8 are retired teachers, several from the Cairo-Durham district, where the group had its genesis.

“I'll take credit for formalizing this idea,” says Debbie Karnes. “Some of us were going out to dinner already, so I suggested we make it more official, try to find different places. Now here we are, 17 years later.”

Joyce and Mark Notarnicola are also both retired teachers.

Joyce Notarnicola says. “We don't talk shop around the table the way we used to, before everybody retired from teaching. Now it's more about the food, and how everybody else is doing.”

In other words, their health.

“The older we get, the more medical stuff creeps in,” says Don Teator.

But there has been no talk of winding down the group.

“We're in it for the long haul,” says Debbie Karnes. “It's only a few hours, once a month, and we're all good friends who like to catch up. Why would we put a stop to that?”

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