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Volin Café brings neighbors, friends together for good food and conversation

By Loretta Sorensen
P&D Correspondent

VOLIN — The community is small but the appetites are large, and that's at least part of what keeps people coming to the Volin Community Café.

Rural Volin resident Cindy Johnson took over managing and cooking meals in 2006 and said patrons take pleasure in the company of the friends and neighbors they find at the café every bit as much as they enjoy the food.

"You can get to pretty much know who's coming in at what time," Johnson said. "We open at six and we barely finish serving breakfast when people are coming in for lunch. When I started I had no idea that lunchtime around here starts somewhere around 10:30. That's the schedule for a lot of these guys."

While many patrons consist of entire families, the standard customer throughout the week is one of the farmers or businessmen in the Volin, Gayville and Wakonda areas.

"Most times, the wives are working or aren't home for one reason or another and the men need breakfast and lunch," Johnson said. "They know they can come in when they're ready and get fast service so they can get back to the field or whatever farm chores they're doing. Many of our patrons are farmers from the Volin area, but we do see people from the surrounding communities, including Yankton."

Johnson leapt into the fire, so to speak, in order to learn how to manage the cooking, shopping, cleaning and other tasks her job requires. The café is owned by the Volin Community Club.

"Bud Clay comes in every morning and starts the coffee and the grill," Johnson said. "That way I don't have to come in quite so early."

The six-day work week and broad range of responsibilities Johnson's job demands don't fit the skills or career plans of just anyone.

"I'll never forget the day we opened," Johnson said. "For several days, I worked with a friend and former café employee to 'learn the ropes' before the café reopened. It was a Thursday and we weren't open long at all before the place was packed."

Johnson was nervous enough about executing her new duties. However, when her mentor found she needed to leave the café over the lunch hour, leaving Johnson alone with all the customers, Johnson was stunned.

"I told her she couldn't leave, but she insisted she had to," Johnson said. "Once she was gone I saw that I could handle things and it went as smoothly as possible. Looking back on it, leaving me alone that first day was actually the best thing that could have happened for me. I learned I could do whatever I had to do."

The café's menu consists of the basic types of dishes found in any small, privately owned establishment. The difference is that everything is made from scratch with 'real' food. No packaged meals or pre-mixed ingredients.

"Shopping gets interesting sometimes," Johnson said. "That's probably one of the hardest parts of the job, picking up the right amounts of all the different ingredients you need. We've had wonderful feedback on the taste and quality of the food. That's the kind of response we want to see."

Lunchtime menus generally consist of specials such as meat loaf, fried chicken, roast beef or pork. Patrons who enjoy a particular special often come early for lunch.

"Otherwise, the specials



PHOTO BY LORETTA SORENSEN

A wide variety of homemade menu items and a large helping of small town hospitality are available at the Volin Community Cafe under the management of rural Volin resident Cindy Johnson.

might be sold out by the time they get here," Johnson said. "It's not at all unusual to run out before lunch time is over. It's difficult to gauge how many people are coming on any particular day. If I know a certain dish is really popular, I usually make more of that one special to help make sure people get what they want when they come in."

Along with tasty, quality menu items, customers receive a smile and lively banter if they enjoy that type of socializing with their meal. The small café quickly fills with people and lively chatter in a constant cycle of in and out.

"Most of the people who come in know each other and are just as interested in the latest news as they are in

getting something to eat," Johnson said. "I have a good time trading quips with some of the regulars. I think the informal, homey atmosphere is what a lot of people are looking for. We try to make everyone feel at home when they come in."

Johnson said she has a "right hand, left hand and all around great support" in Wendy Sathe who regularly works at the café. Trina Knutson and Dana Hoxeng also lend a hand as necessary. Holidays usually mean extra work for Johnson as she prepares pies to fill customer orders.

"I made about 30 pies for Thanksgiving," she said. "It's a lot of work, and sometimes I'm at the café past closing time because there's just that

much to be done. But I love the work and all the camaraderie. I put a lot of effort into making the best food I can and serving it in a way that's fun and makes people want to come back. It's really rewarding when a customer calls me and said they enjoyed a particular menu item. This is a good service for our community to offer and we're all enjoying it in many different ways."

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