

One of the first things you'll probably notice when you meet Chef Ric Kerr is his stature—he's a big guy. But what you'll probably remember about Ric is what a great guy he is.

Ric, a deeply religious man, is the owner of Tasteful Dinners/Tasteful Catering, which is located just east of Ankeny Blvd. on Shurfine Drive in Ankeny. Here you will find an eclectic little restaurant, with each wall reflecting some part of Ric's life: his experience as a Boy Scout, his grandmother's kitchen, his work with police dogs, and his interest in music.

Ric says that he strives to please his customers. If you order an egg salad sandwich, Ric knows that your mouth is watering for an egg salad with particular ingredients, and he will ask the questions needed to make it your way. He adds, "Our restaurant is on the way to Iowa State, so we're a good place to call in an order and conveniently pick up your tailgating fare."

An Ankeny resident since he was 3 years old, Ric used to love spending time with his grandfather on his farm in southern Iowa. That life is reflected in his cooking today. His cuisine is what he refers to as "farm gourmet: down-home cooking with a twist." Ric showed me his grandmother's recipe box, which he still pulls out to use for a variety of dishes. His goal is to bring back the good feelings of growing up and being in his grandmother's kitchen, he shares. He considers it his ministry to touch people through his restaurant and catering business.

The kitchen at Tasteful Dinners/Tasteful Catering is 98% from scratch, which means that they make all of their own salad dressings. They also make all of their own bread except for pumpnickel.

Ric says that he started out wanting to be a part of the agriculture industry after he completed his education at Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) in 1987. However, as fate would have it, owing to the Farm Crisis, there were very few agriculture related jobs available. "I had been working for the Des Moines Marriott to earn money to get through college," Ric relates, "so I decided the hotel and food industry seemed like my next step."

After going back to DMACC and earning a degree in Restaurant/Hotel Management, Ric recounts how next he "learned the ropes" working for the Des Moines Marriott, the Dearborn Inn Marriott near Detroit, and the St. Louis Marriott Convention Hotel.

His experience at Marriott taught him the value of maintaining high standards in his business, he says. Along the way, Ric also ran a few franchise restaurants. "Tasteful Dinners/Tasteful Catering was started in 2006 with two good buddies," he says. "The buddies soon realized how much work is involved in owning your own restaurant/catering company, and we have gone off in different directions. Today it's me and a staff of eight."

Ric says that what makes his business stand out from other caterers and restaurants is the diversity you will find on his menu in the restaurant, as well as his catering menu. "My staff and I attempt to customize each order for the restaurant and on

the catering side for the customer. For me, the menu is actually a shopping list. From a catering perspective, I want to know what you the customer would like, what the occasion is to be catered, what the demographics of the function are, etc. I consider your budget—I can play with it."

And he comes up with some unique ideas, such as a martini mashed potato bar. He caters for groups of any size, including dinner for 700, lunch for 300, weddings, four-day business meetings for 260, and concerts. Rick adds, "I'm booked a year out for some occasions, but I'm willing to work with you if you need something catered tomorrow. My job is to make you look good. We can also prepare family recipes for large groups, or do research if there's something you remember having when you were a kid but have no recipe for."

I spoke to Chris Anderson, executive assistant to a CEO for a financial services company. "Ric was recommended by another executive assistant, so I decided to give him a try. We have clients from Canada, New York, and all over. We work with Ric an average of once, sometimes two to three times a week. Ric and his staff are so customer- and service-oriented. By now Ric has catered for some of the same people on different occasions, and he remembers them and what we served them last or what they particularly enjoyed. He provides great meals within any budget. We even had him cater our office Thanksgiving dinner and it was great."

Vicki Barr, who works for Iowa Clinic, also highly recommends Ric for catering. "We call him an average of two times a month at least. There is never an issue with them being late, and they are so pleasant to work with. The food is creative, and it is always fresh and tasty."

When I ask how he manages to cover all of his commitments with just eight

employees, he responds, "I have many friends who like to come and 'play' in the restaurant when I need them. I have college kids who work on Christmas and during summer breaks. I have some other friends who live in different states, but always want to work here when they're back home. It really works out well all around."

When I ask about the challenges of running a restaurant/catering business, Ric says, "We live and die by time. I learned my work ethic from my experience in the ag industry. Basically, what the customer needs is always what we strive to supply. The biggest challenge is marketing—growing the business enough to justify hiring more employees. Otherwise, I'm always on-call and always available to do what needs to be done."

I ask about Ric's attire for the various events that he caters. He comments, "I can dress to please, or I dress according to my mood. I catered a wake for a friend who asked me to wear tie-dye pants in honor of the deceased. I was glad to accommodate his wish."

To see videos and to get an idea of the wide range of menus offered by Tasteful Dinners/Tasteful Catering, check out the website at www.TastefulDinners.com. There is a link to contact Ric on the website, or he can be reached at 515-965-3324. If you have a chance to visit with Ric, ask him about the significance of his logo. It is quite inspiring!

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TASTEFUL DINNERS/ TASTEFUL CATERING

By Pam Riley



Chef Ric Kerr