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Last modified: Wednesday, May 28, 2008 4:28 AM CDT

Steakhouse celebrates 70 years

By: Kurt Kloeblen, Staff writer

Owners **Mike** and **Debbie Van Noy** are ever present fixtures at Jess and Jim's Steakhouse, now celebrating its 70th year of business.

The restaurant has remained in the family the entire time.

"It's what we do," Mike said.

Jess and Jim's, 517 E. 135th St.,

Martin City, is known as one of Kansas City's and the country's top steakhouses. Starting with a 1972 article in Playboy by **Calvin Trillin**, the restaurant has been featured numerous times in national publications, extolling its virtues.

"After the article came out in '72, we had to expand," Debbie said. "That was our saving grace."

Jess Kincaid and **Jim Wright** founded the restaurant in 1938 and brought in cousin **R.C. Van Noy**, who eventually took over operations. Mike said Jim liked to sip Old Charter and play pool against colonels from Richards-Gebaur Air Force Base.

Those games did not always end well for the restaurant.

"If he was losing, he'd kick everybody out of the restaurant and lock the doors," Mike said. "Back then he'd also fall asleep on the couch out front."



Ben McCall/Sun Photo WHAT TO CHOOSE? Joining his friends for lunch, Dan Tarwater, South Kansas City, center, places his order for server Leslie Cornett, while his friends Bob Atchity and Barney Cook, South Kansas City, wait Friday at Jess and Jim's Steak House, 517 E. 135th St.

R.C. became known for his personality and warmth with guests.

"Everyone knew when they walked in, they would see R.C. standing at the end of the bar," Debbie said.

"My dad was an extreme talker," Mike said. "He could talk to anyone and he would talk to everyone."

Mike and Debbie said that family feeling is important and why they believe Jess and Jim's has stayed successful.

"(Customers) like seeing people that know them," Mike said. "We have a lot of repeat customers who ask for the same waitress or waiter. They feel like they're family and we try to treat them like they are family."

Wait staff turnover at Jess and Jim's is slow. Many servers have worked there for more than 10 years, with some working more than 40 years.

Diners are likely to see at least one member of the Van Noy family working at any given time. Debbie and Mike said their kids have been raised at the restaurant and work there too. The oldest, **Ashley**, has taken on some management duties, while **Rachael** and **Mike Jr.** wait tables and host.

Mike said he spent his entire life in and around the restaurant and even remembers sneaking scoops of sherbet from the freezer when he was 5. By 13, his father put him to work in the kitchen, and to this day he continues to cut all the meat and bakes hundreds of loaves of bread each week. He cooks on the weekend and keeps an eye on the kitchen most other nights.

At 16, Debbie started working at R.C.'s Chicken, just a few steps away across 135th Street. She met Mike and has been helping in Jess and Jim's dining room ever since. She said R.C. taught her how to treat customers.

"When I started, he introduced me to everyone," Debbie said. "He made sure I knew everything. That's why I know a lot of the people; he was the one that introduced me."

Mike also spends a lot of time helping run other restaurants owned by the family. Although R.C.'s and R.C.'s Back Door Bar are the only the ones the family still owns, other restaurants have included R.C.'s Cantina, Martin City Pub, Jess and Jim's Annex, Chilrelli's Pasta House, Country Junction and El Chirito.

Mike describes his schedule for eight years during the time they owned all the restaurants.

"At one point, I would come here at 8 in the morning, open this place, go open up the pub and then open up the cantina," Mike

said. "I would work down here and periodically check on the other two. I would close this place at 10:30 p.m., close the pub at 1:30 a.m. and close the cantina at 3 a.m. I would get home at about 4."

Mike said his current schedule of a little more than 80 hours per week feels like "a vacation."

For Mike and Debbie, Jess and Jim's is home. The two got married on a Monday because they had to work the weekend. Mike is hopeful the next generation of Van Noy's will keep the restaurant going.

"For me, it's a living, but the most important thing is my dad," Mike said. "I walk in here and I feel like I'm home. I grew up here ... I've been here all my life."

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