



Bluff Lake Catfish Farm

by Rich Belmont

A destination restaurant is one that has a strong enough appeal to draw customers from beyond its community. By that definition Bluff Lake Catfish Farm is certainly a destination restaurant. It is only open Friday and Saturday nights and Sundays and caters to customers from all over the Tri-States. It is not unusual for this restaurant to serve 650 Saturday night fish fry dinners.



Linda Wells is the owner and chief cook and her Son, Kory, is the manager. In 1969, Linda's Dad, Clayton Kuhlman, traded a house in Maquoketa, IA for some farmland. He liked to do a little farming and Linda's Stepmother liked to fish. So Clayton built a pond and stocked it with catfish. Then he put a small camper on a hill next to the pond so his wife could fish while he puttered around his farm. The peaceful location is situated in a beautiful Iowa River Valley between two lakes, a 50 foot waterfall and the Maquoketa River.

The restaurant dates from 1971. In that year Clayton began to sell his neighbors the rights to fish in his pond. He replaced the camper with a one-room refreshment stand so people could purchase snacks and even have the catfish they caught cooked to order.

Before long the International Coon Dog Association found out about the farm and asked if they could conduct a national field trial on the property. This necessitated the need for a real kitchen and restrooms to be added to the building.

Linda began working with her Dad in 1972 and immediately found herself cooking not only catfish but haddock, chicken, shrimp and a whole menu of dinners. In 1977 her Mom and Stepfather, Don Reese, purchased the property from her Dad. Then Linda bought the business from Don in 1989. Now she has been operating Bluff Lake Catfish Farm for over 25 years already!



People come from many miles away because the Farm offers a respite from the rigor of daily life. The restaurant is surrounded on two sides by a pond and has a deck where you can sit and talk to friends while the kids throw pellet food to the ducks and catfish. You must not be in a hurry. Unless you arrive at opening time you will most likely wait an hour or so for a table. There is a bar in the waiting area so the guys will usually watch sports on TV while the ladies talk or visit the gift shop where there is a large assortment of handmade crafts and wood art pieces.

Reservations are not accepted but large groups are easily accommodated. The servers skillfully slide tables around and I noticed there are always tables of anywhere from 4 to 20 diners.

The reason for the wait and the large groups of happy customers is simple: The food is really good! Linda's motto is "I will not serve any food to anybody that I would not eat myself". Most of the ingredients



are made from scratch. The haddock breading is Linda's own recipe and the coleslaw is prepared according to her Grandma's recipe. The kitchen staff prepares their own shrimp cocktail and tartar sauce. They also make a special sauce for the haddock they call "goop".

I have been in many commercial kitchens and I saw something in this kitchen I have never seen before. I visited Linda's kitchen during the day and I noticed the fryers with no less than 15 baskets were all absolutely spotless! They are scrubbed and cleaned every day and the oil is replaced every day as well.

Bluff Lake Catfish Farm

9343 95th Avenue, Maquoketa, IA 52060

563-652-3272 www.BluffLakeCatfishFarm.com

HOURS: Fri - Sat, 4 - 10 p.m., Sun: 11 a.m. - 8 p.m.

Closed Mon-Thu, Month of December & all legal holidays

DINING STYLE: Come as you are

NOISE LEVEL: Loud when busy

RECOMMENDATIONS: All-You-Can-Eat Friday Catfish, Saturday Haddock Fish Fry and Sunday Shrimp & Chicken Dinners; Friday Prime Rib Special; Chicken Dinner; Shrimp Dinner, Western Fries

LIQUOR SERVICE: Full Bar

PRICES: \$6.50 - \$19.95; All You Can Eat Dinners: \$11.99

PAYMENT OPTIONS: Cash, Debit, Checks, Major Credit

ACCESSIBILITY: Front Door & Restrooms

KIDS POLICY: Menu, High Chairs, Booster Seats

RESERVATIONS: No

CATERING: No **TAKE OUT:** No **DELIVERY:** No

PARKING: Large Private Lot



Most people visit Bluff Lake Catfish Farm for the All You Can Eat Nightly Specials. The Friday Night Special is your choice of either Whole or Fillet Catfish. The dinner includes Waffle Fries, coleslaw and rolls with cinnamon butter.

Now despite what you might think the catfish you are eating are not fished out of the pond outside the restaurant. They are from United States catfish farms and are never from any foreign suppliers. In fact, 95% of all U.S. farmed catfish are raised in the 4 states of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. All catfish in the U.S. are known as Channel Catfish. They are vegetarian and are bottom feeders in their natural habitat. However, U.S. raised catfish grow in fresh water clay bottom ponds and are fed a gourmet diet of high protein food pellets made of a mixture of soybeans, corn wheat, vitamins and minerals. Farm raised catfish have learned to feed on these pellets that are designed to float on top of the ponds. This helps in producing healthier fish that are cleaner and milder tasting than the catfish produced in Vietnam or China. Moreover, unlike the Asian catfish, the U.S. raised fish are not fed any antibodies, hormones or iodine.

Here is a fun fact: There are 16 TCI-Certified (The Catfish Institute) U.S. Processing Plants with a combined processing capability of more than 10 million pounds of U.S. Farm-Raised Catfish per week every week of the year.

There is also a Prime Rib Special Dinner on Friday nights. This is not all you can eat and that's a good thing because the slice you get is quite large. The Prime Rib is cooked the old fashioned way in roasting pans in conventional ovens where it is slow roasted for 5 to 8 hours. This dinner is served with choice of potatoes



and salad. Choosing the potato is a big decision: you can request a Baked Potato, Hash Browns, French Fries, Cottage Fries or Western Fries. The French Fries are straight cut, the Cottage Fries are really Waffle Fries and the Western Fries are what are normally referred to as Wedge Cuts. I like these the best and if you have not had them I highly recommend you try them.

The Saturday Night Special is All You Can Eat Haddock. It is available every Saturday all year except the month of December when the restaurant is closed. The Saturday Fish Fry is the most popular dinner on the menu. Only more expensive Haddock from Iceland is served. It is cut and hand breaded just before frying. It is accompanied by Waffle Fries, coleslaw and bread and butter (upon request).

Interestingly Catfish are not served on Saturday. Since most people prefer Haddock there are simply not enough fryers to cook Catfish as well. Besides, Catfish require a higher oil temperature which would considerably slow down the kitchen staff.



On Sunday the restaurant is open from 11 am to 8 pm and the Shrimp and Chicken is front and center. With this dinner you get a basket of chicken, a basket of extra large shrimp coated with an exclusive breading and a basket of straight cut fries. Since it is all you can eat the servers will keep refilling the baskets until you can't possibly eat any more.

These All You Can Eat dinners are an excellent way for families to hold down expenses. The adult price is \$11.99, kids ages 2 - 9 eat for \$6 and the cost for toddlers is only one dollar!



Of course there are many other menu items to choose from. The Ribeye will satisfy any steak lover. There are also Hamburger Steak, Shrimp, Chicken, Ham Steak, Scallops and Seafood Platter dinners. Those of you who are not too hungry can order Hamburgers, Tenderloin, Chicken or Fish sandwiches.



Bluff Lake Catfish Farm is a splendid place to visit. The dinners are delicious and satisfying and the hidden, tranquil location is intriguing.

Getting there is easy too! From the Julien Dubuque Bridge just take US 61 South. Go right onto 150th Street (County E-17), left onto Caves Road (County Y-31) and right onto 98th Street into Maquoketa Caves State Park. Go through the park and make the first left to stay on 98th Street and then bear to your left onto 95th Avenue. Just don't get your car washed before you go like I did. The last mile is a gravel road!

