

# { 365ink dining: country junction restaurant }



## Country Junction Restaurant

by Rich Belmont

Are you aware the epitome of comfort food dining is so close to us? It's called the Country Junction and it is just 25 miles west of Dubuque at Highway 20 Exit 294 in Dyersville, IA. The definition of comfort food is simply prepared food that provides a sense of wellbeing. This certainly describes everything on the menu. When you dine at Country Junction, or "CJ" as the locals call it, you cannot help feeling everything is right with the world at least for a little while. Perhaps this is why CJ serves 500 people on a good day and over 130,000 happy customers a year.

Visiting CJ allows us to indulge in a bit of nostalgia for our agriculture heritage. When you drive up the first thing you see is a barn complete with attached silo. It was built by Jerry and Jeanine Koch. Mr. Koch is a former Dyersville mayor and Lions Club 2012 Citizen of the Year. He does residential and commercial construction but originally started out building barns for farmers. When he created Country Junction in 1990 he purposely planned to create a monument to farming. He accomplished all that and almost as an afterthought also built an impressive farm museum. The large beams that span the restaurant were salvaged from a 100 year old downtown Chicago lake warehouse. Original silo boards, beveled exterior siding and old wood used in many of the rooms was salvaged from farm sites throughout Iowa. When you visit you should take the time to look around. Family heirlooms and antique farm equipment is on display in all the rooms. Walk up the stairs to the hayloft and check out the old triple box wagon, cream separator, horse drawn John Deere corn planter, sleigh and buggy. There are many other tools and implements to see and it's fun to explain to the kids what some of them were used for.



Tom and Kay King have owned and operated Country Junction since it opened in 1990. Tom grew up on a farm in Fairbank (near Oelwein) Iowa. He started his career making pizzas in 1981, then graduated from Des Moines Area Community College with a degree in restaurant management. He was Kitchen manager at Amana Barn in the Amana Colonies for three years. Tom knows how to run a professional restaurant. Not only has he been doing it for twenty two years but he is also on the board of the Iowa Restaurant Association.

Even so, Tom refuses to take credit for his restaurant's success. He says CJ is a people business. He currently has a staff of 65 locally known as the CJ Family. Many of his employees have been with him 15 and even 20 years and some of them have their own family members working alongside them. CJ is a place where dedicated, loyal and experienced families serve families.

When you first enter Country Junction it's a good idea to turn right and go into the Silo Lounge. First notice the really cool bar itself. It's in the shape of a question mark! Then look up and you will see you are in fact in a silo! The martinis are specialties here. They certainly are not your father's martinis. They have names like Cherry Cheesecake, CJ Shamrock, Bombsicle, Chocolate Truffle, Dirty Goose, Dreamsicle and Fire Engine Red. Try guessing what's in each one of these. In fact, you will probably want to sample all of them. So perhaps you should become a member of the Happy-tini Club. When you join this exclusive club you get to have your own glass on display. You receive a Key-finder punch card and every time you buy 7 martinis you get your 8th one free.



Beer is also a specialty here. The focus is on Microbrews and Craft Beers and they are served in pint size Ball wide mouth jars. There are 8 different styles of beer on tap. Several Iowa beers are in stock and so are some from small breweries in neighboring states. You can choose from Goose Island, Summit, Shock Top, Backpocket, Great River Brewery and Millstream. Of course, if you prefer national brands there are 6 of those including Bud, Samuel Adams and Stella Artois. I have found the best way to sample some of these brews is to order a Beer Flight. You get three 6 oz. glasses for \$4.00. Right now you can evaluate Summit Extra Pale Ale, Shock Top Raspberry Wheat, Millstream Schild Brau Amber, Goose Island 312, Backpocket Slingshot Dunkel, Great River Organic Farmer Brown Ale and Millstream John's Generations White Ale.

All the vino is from close-by wineries. You can order your favorite Tabor Home or Park Farm wine to compliment any dinner.



Now you should know CJ is open 7 days a week for breakfast, lunch and dinner. If you are one of my loyal readers you already know I always suggest you save room for dessert. So this time I am going to tell you about dessert first. That's because when you open either the lunch or dinner menu the first thing you see is a statement: "Our regulars order pie first!" Country Junction is known throughout the upper Midwest for baked from scratch homemade pies. The dough is made in the kitchen and all of the fillings are prepared from fresh ingredients. Baking is done every day and sometimes twice a day. You can usually have your choice of Apple, Cherry, Peach and Blueberry fruit pies. Or you can choose Coconut Cream, Sour Cream Raisin, Banana Cream, Lemon Meringue, Chocolate Mousse or Rhubarb Crumb. There are also seasonal pies, carrot cake with cream frosting and other specialty desserts.



These pies are all so delicious it is not unusual for the kitchen to run out of your favorite ones. This is why longtime patrons know they need to order pies first! You can order whole pies to go, too. But here again, it's a good idea to call ahead and request the ones you want.

**Country Junction Restaurant**  
 913 15th Avenue SE, Dyersville, IA 52040  
 563-875-7055 | 800-598-9466 | [www.CountryJunctionRestaurant.com](http://www.CountryJunctionRestaurant.com)

**HOURS:** Mon – Sat: 7 am – 9 pm, Sun: 9 am – 8:30 pm  
**DINING STYLE:** Casual **NOISE LEVEL:** Conversational  
**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Haystack Appetizer, Open Face Beef, Chicken Pot Pie, Gunpowder Rib eye, Smothered Roast Beef, Apricot Chicken Breast, Iowa Ham Steak, Country Fried Chicken Strips, Cod  
**LIQUOR SERVICE:** Full bar, Martinis, 8 styles of Beer, Beer Flights  
**PRICE RANGE:** Breakfast: \$4.50 - \$8.99  
 Lunch: \$5.00 - \$12.99 Dinner: \$6.25 - \$17.99  
**PAYMENT OPTIONS:** Cash, Check, Debit, All Credit Cards  
**ACCESSIBILITY:** Front Door & Restrooms  
**KIDS POLICY:** Welcome! Menu, Highchairs, Boosters  
**RESERVATIONS:** Yes, Recommended for 6 or more  
**CATERING:** Yes **TAKE OUT:** Yes **DELIVERY:** No  
**PARKING:** Large Private Lot

By definition comfort food is simply made. But that doesn't mean it's easy to make. Everything on the menu is cooked from scratch and local ingredients whenever possible. For example right now all the salads are tossed with lettuce grown right in Dyersville. Fresh vegetables are hand-cut for the soups, salads and gravies. Meats are hand-cut sometimes in house and sometimes by the Dyersville meat locker called Wholesale Meats. Mashed



potatoes are made from real potatoes and meatloaf is prepared in the kitchen. The burgers are hand formed from a mix of chuck and round ground fresh daily by Wholesale Meats.

Old fashioned burgers are always popular lunch items. However, the number one best seller is the Open Face Beef. Chuck roast is roasted, then roasted a second time with special seasonings, carrots and



onions. Then an outrageous number of thick slices are placed on two slices of bread, sided with mashed potatoes and totally covered with a rich, thick beef gravy. Open Face Pork and Open Face Meatloaf are done up the same way. Now meatloaf is always different so in this restaurant I should tell you the loaf is straight ground beef, finely textured, with homemade BBQ sauce baked in. Then it is served with that excellent thick beef gravy poured all over it. There is no ketchup in this meatloaf which is just the way I like it! Chicken strips are also a great lunch. Hand breaded chicken breast tenders are beer battered, covered with Panko bread crumbs and fried.

The Reuben is very good here too. Oven roasted corn beef brisket, Swiss cheese and sauerkraut is placed on grilled marble rye bread along with a homemade Thousand Island dressing.

If you are watching how much you spend (and who isn't these days) a Lunch Value Menu is available from 11 am to 4 pm Monday through Saturday. Cheeseburgers, Chicken Strips, Mac and Cheese, Meatloaf Sandwiches, Mini Taco Salads and lunch size salads are all available for only \$5.00 to \$6.25.



Dinners are a real treat at Country Junction. Not only are they delicious but they are an exercise in total contentment. On a recent visit all the entrées sounded so good my dinner guests and I had a tough time deciding what to order. Luckily our experienced and friendly server, Kaye Trumm, was able to help us tremendously. Christina ordered the Gunpowder rib eye (above) with grilled onions and sautéed mushrooms. This 12 oz. hand-trimmed steak gets its name from the black peppercorn blend it is seasoned with. Bryce had the Smothered Roast Beef. It's the open faced beef CJ Classic topped with a



special cheese sauce, grilled onions, mushrooms and bacon (above). Bryce is so predictable. We all knew he would order this just because it had bacon on it. Bryce's mom, Fran, loved the Chicken Pot Pie (right). It's made with the same crust used in the famous pies, plus a couple of ladles of roasted chicken filling and a big scoop of mashed potatoes placed on top. Margie had Apricot Chicken Breast: grilled chicken is topped with a very light sweet apricot sauce which she described as simply delightful. I was immensely pleased with my Ham & Cabbage soup and bone-in cured and smoked Ham Steak covered with a mildly sweet mustard sauce (right) that complimented the ham perfectly.



Breakfast consists of bacon, eggs, sausage, ham, French toast, pancakes or biscuits and gravy during the week. However, on Sundays breakfast turns into an adventure. It's served Family Style from 9 am to noon. Copious quantities of eggs, bacon, sausage, hash brown, pancakes, toast and cinnamon rolls are brought to your table on platters. Then the Dinner Buffet goes from 11 am to 2 pm. Pressure fried chicken is always on the serving line and other entrees of the day might include Roast Beef, Swiss steak, Chicken Noodle Casserole plus soup, potatoes and salad bar. Dinner starts at 2 pm on Sunday, it's a good night to visit when a 3 piece Fried Chicken dinner is only \$10.50.

Kids eat free on Tuesday night. There are several private party rooms to accommodate up to 200 of your best friends and family. The CJ staff can also handle really big parties up to 600 people off-premises. Be sure to step into the gift shop. There you will find jams and jellies, Lolita glassware, notepads, mouse pads, Beanpod soy candles, soy bean potpourri and a whole lot more. Country Junction's food will satisfy you; buying something in their store will make you happy too!

