

## The Greeter Seater and the Pea Packer

“Welcome to Ray’s. Thanks for coming out tonight. How many?” the eager teenager in the red T-shirt asked as soon as I came through the door to Ray’s Millpond Café. He was glancing at the seating chart on the white-erase board.

“Just one,” I said. “I want to order take-out.”

“You’ll have to go to the counter for that,” he nodded toward a woman sitting on a stool near a cash register.

I had been to Ray’s twice before with my in-laws. Ray’s is a low sagging unpretentious building at the end of a swampy rural road with cars scattered in jagged rows in an unpaved parking lot. Inside, there are several smallish rooms with uneven floors where noisy diners squeeze elbow to elbow around tables spaced uncomfortably close. People come here in droves on Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 4:30 – 9 to feast on seafood served family style with slaw, sweet pickles and dill pickles, and grits with cheese or butter served in heaping bowls.

Tonight I was here by myself. Rather than sit self-consciously alone at a table I would take my food to the deck out back where I’d enjoy the solitude and the view of the overgrown Mill Pond. Perhaps I would see an alligator if the red and white warning signs are to be believed.

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At the counter I asked, “Is this where I order for take-out?”

“Sure is,” she said cheerfully. “You know what you want?”

“I’ll need a menu. I’ve been here only twice and that was long ago.”

“Here you go, hon,” she said as she handed me the menu photocopied singled-sided on plain white office paper. Ray’s Millpond Café is not the kind of place for leather-bound booklets created by marketing consultants replete with color photographs of culinary extravagances created by chefs with impressive credentials.

I took a minute to consider the options: catfish, gator bites, crab cakes, whiting, flounder, grouper, oysters, scallops, shrimp, and combinations of two or three items, broiled or fried.

In an uncharacteristic splurge, I said, “I’ll have the seafood platter.” I was channeling my good buddy Dusty, who occasionally made decisions based on an informal philosophy that could be summarized as “What the hell! Go for it!” Or maybe I was influenced by my mother-in-law Ann who once warned me when I took her and my father-in-law out for dinner, “I don’t look at the right side of the menu.” That was her way of saying that she did not consider the price of a meal when making her choice. Queen Ann ordered whatever she wanted regardless of cost.

“Anything to drink?”

“Half and half tea, please,” again suppressing my tightwad tendency to scrimp and settle for water.

She scribbled on one of those little paper pads that make duplicate copies, ripping the lower one off and clipping it to a clothespin at the small opening to the kitchen where cooks hustled and servers swerved in and out.

“That’ll be twenty-seven dollars even,” she said. “It’ll be about 20 minutes. You can wait in the lobby.”

I paid and returned to the empty lobby, taking a seat near the fellow in red T-Shirt. Twenty minutes should be plenty of time to entertain myself with people watching. Meanwhile, there was only me and the tall, slender greeter/seater, who seemed willing to chat.

Guessing that he was a high school student, I asked, "Do you go to Berrien High School?"

"No. I don't go to school," he volunteered.

Seeing my surprised expression, he explained.

"I can't seem to pass much so I dropped out. I'm working on my GED. I just started this job."

Several people in work clothes came through the door. Men in boots. Women in shirts with slogans. Kids pleading to see the gator. Everybody in jeans.

"Welcome to Ray's. Thanks for coming out tonight. How many?"

"There will be thirteen of us," said the lady who seemed to be the organizer. "We called ahead."

"I'll get you seated in just a minute," he said while looking at the white board with the seating chart.

Once he had seated that baker's dozen and several couples that came in shortly thereafter, he returned to his station, replenished his supply of photocopied menus, and seemed eager to resume our conversation.

"You say you just started working here. How did that happen?"

“My Mama works here. She’s the best waitress they have. Been here eight years. They’ll never fire her. They needed some help to greet people and get them to their tables, so she got me this job.”

“Did you drive here?” I inquired.

“Nope. I rode with Mama. I’m fifteen. I don’t have my license yet. But I’m saving to buy a car. Mama will take me to get my permit as soon as it is legal. She’s also going to sign for me to join the Air Force when I turn 17. I hear they make \$40 an hour. I make \$20 an hour on Saturdays working for my Pa Pa. He does construction in Valdosta. He pays me under the table. No taxes. The government already gets too much of our money.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a plan,” I complimented.

“I sure do. Meanwhile, they’re paying me nine dollars an hour here,” he volunteered.

“Nine dollars an hour? I just paid \$27 for a seafood platter and a tea to go. You’d have to work three hours just for supper! What do you think about that?” I inquired.

“It’s a good thing I don’t like seafood all that much,” he grinned.

More customers arrived. He greeted them immediately: “Welcome to Ray’s. Thanks for coming out tonight. How many?”

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I sat alone on the steps of the wooden platform where I could see pine trees on the distant shoreline glowing in the evening light. I ate my fried seafood platter and fixin’s with flimsy plastic utensils, recalling the times my father-in-law Henry Richbourg brought me to Ray’s. Twice he

had led me to this deck with hopes of seeing an alligator. Twice we had feasted on fried seafood at a crowded table. I discovered why people drive for miles to eat at Ray's. The warm Southern hospitality. Bowls of pickles and grits. More than a mere meal, eating at Ray's is a ritual.

My dear sweet father-in-law passed away several days ago just before his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. I came to Ray's to reminisce about the many good times we shared. Henry Richbourg came from humble beginnings. According to his obituary, "Henry grew up in the "Low Country" of South Carolina and graduated from St. George High School in Dorchester County. He worked to put himself through college and medical school, earning a Bachelor of Science in Biology from the University of South Carolina. Henry spent a year in Washington, DC at the Smithsonian Institute's Entomology Department. He graduated from the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston and remained to complete a year-long fellowship in Internal Medicine. While he was a medical student, Henry met his future wife, Mary Ann Guinn, a nursing student ... Dr. Richbourg served as a Captain and flight surgeon in the United States Air Force... He began his private practice in St. George, South Carolina... The family moved to Nashville, Georgia where he served as a much beloved family physician. ... Dr. Richbourg will be remembered for his dedication to medicine, his adventurous spirit and the love he shared with his family and the Berrien County community. His legacy lives on in the lives he touched, healed and saved, along with the memories he created." The obituary did not mention that he had driven to Washington state one summer to pack sweet peas, working long hours during the intense harvest season to earn money for school.

I thought about that fifteen-year-old greeter/seater with big dreams making \$9 an hour. He's not out with friends this Saturday night. Not

on his phone or computer. Not shopping for expensive shoes or clothes to impress peers. Not getting into mischief. He's at work. He has goals. He is optimism personified, like Henry Richbourg must have been at that age. I hope his future is as bright as Henry's, and that one day his obituary describes a life well lived, a life of purpose and accomplishments, a concise account of dreams come true, with much goodness shared along the way. I hope he loves people as much as Henry did. I hope he is loved and admired and appreciated by others as much as Henry is.

As I contemplated the magenta, orange, and violet sunset mirrored in the still water of Ray's Millpond, I noticed a young alligator. Only his eyes and nostrils were visible, but there he was!

Welcome to Ray's. I'm thankful I came out tonight.

GR Davis Jr

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