



Cornering *the* MARKET

*Ouita Michel's Windy Corner Market Draws
the Farm Crowd and Urban Foodies*

By Jacalyn Carfagno | Photos by Kirk Schlea

At mid-morning on a summer day, Windy Corner in rural Fayette County is in what amounts to a lull. Customers sit at tables decorated with Ale-8-1 bottles sprouting zinnias and sunflowers while a couple who supplies chickens to the restaurant chat with the manager. Winner's cir-

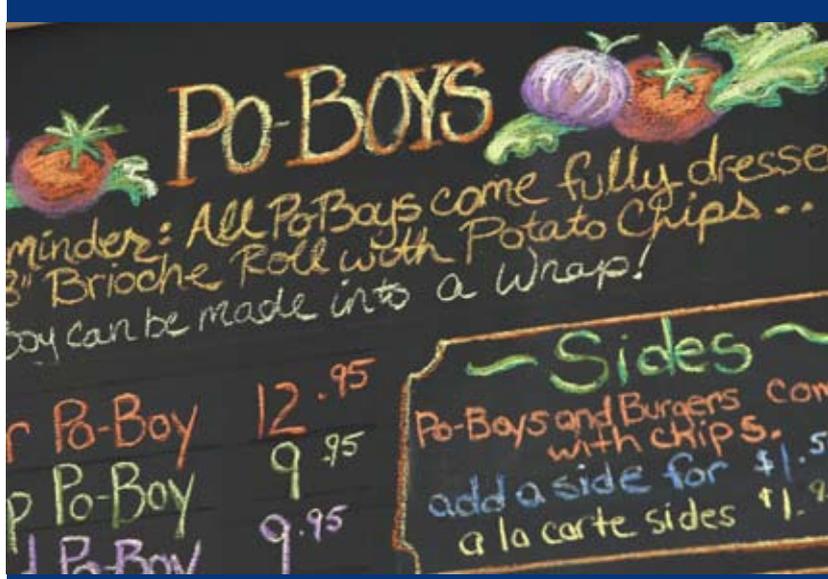
cle photos and silks from neighboring Thoroughbred farms adorn the walls. Inside, Johnny Cash plays over the sound system while on the rear porch a flat-screened TV is devoted to TVG, the racing network, for clients who watch the races while enjoying their sandwiches.

Windy Corner Market and Restaurant has the easy feel, good food, and neighborliness of a place that's been there for generations. But it hasn't. The corner of Bryan Station and Muir Station roads was long home to what Antony Beck described as "a pretty horrible corner store."

Windy Corner has carved out a unique niche in northeastern Fayette County, serving up comfort and supporting "local."







Left, Ouita Michel wanted the restaurant's menu to be an "expression of Kentucky." Above, hearty po-boy sandwiches are a popular staple at Windy Corner.

It was Beck's wife, Angela, who saw the potential in the location. One year she told her husband what she wanted for their anniversary was not an elegant piece of jewelry or work of art or a special vacation. She wanted him to replace that ugly store on the corner down the road from their home at Gainesway Farm with a sandwich shop.

"My wife is a very smart woman, and I always do what she suggests," Beck said.

Antony knew where to go. He'd eaten many a lunch at Ouita and Chris Michel's Wallace Station in Woodford County, as well as dinners at their upscale Holly Hill Inn in Midway.

But Ouita Michel knew from her experiences in farm country that it's not easy to develop a consistent clientele in a rural location. Plus, she worried about expanding too quickly, stretching themselves too thin.

Now, after two years in business at Windy Corner Market and Restaurant, Ouita is able to laugh when she remembers her initial responses to Beck's overtures. "I kept telling him 'I cannot go bankrupt on this business.'"

Beck was determined — and persuasive. He knew the neighborhood; he'd traveled the area and knew the distance from Paris, Winchester, and the Ken-

tucky Horse Park. "Antony had scoped all that out, driven the territory, clocked the miles. He came to me ready with all that information," Ouita said. He'd bought the corner lot and would build to her specifications.

"Every objection I came up with he solved."

So they reached an agreement: Beck would construct and own the building; the Michels would be his tenants and own and operate the restaurant.

By the time Ouita was convinced and began planning for Windy Corner, she was a veteran chef. A graduate of the University of Kentucky, she went to the Culinary Institute of America in New York, where she met and married classmate Chris Michel. After graduating, she worked at restaurants in Manhattan for five years before they settled in Lexington. Back home, Ouita cooked as a sous-chef at Dudley's and at other locations before she became executive chef at Emmett's (now closed). Finally, she and Chris took the leap and bought Holly Hill Inn in Midway in 2000, developing it into a fine dining location serving up local foods but garnering national attention. In the decade that followed the Michels added Wallace Station and the food service at Woodford Reserve Distillery to their growing repertoire.

As their businesses evolved, so did their roles. "I'm the operations person and Chris is the financials person. We call Willa [their 8-year-old daughter] the CEO; we both work for her."

With less time in the kitchen, Ouita had more time to think about the type of food



she wants to serve.

“For this menu I was able to just sit and think about everything that worked and didn’t work from all these restaurants, from Emmett’s to Wallace to Holly Hill.” After accommodating the kitchens that came with historic buildings at Holly Hill and Wallace Station, she was able to design a better workspace, with Beck’s support, at Windy Corner.

But it’s what comes out of the kitchen that matters, and Ouita drew on her experience there, too. “In a way I’m the most proud of this menu than any menu I’ve ever written ... I wanted this to be an expression of Kentucky with everything as fresh and local as possible. So I knew from the get-go it was going to be fried catfish and fried oysters and pulled pork.”

She’d spent more than a decade finding local sources for everything from eggs to chickens to smoked meats and goat cheese. At Windy Corner she found neighboring farmers eager to produce for her restaurant.

“One of the things that I’m really proud of in this business is that I feel like we have successfully taken our local-food commitment and put it into a casual restaurant,” she said.

That commitment has made a difference to one very local



Windy Corner is a popular lunch spot for people who work on nearby farms, bike in the area, and drive in from town.

farm operation, Berries on Bryan Station, so close that sometimes owner/farmer Eric Walles walks his salad mix across the field to Windy Corner. The organic farm supplies more than 90 percent of the restaurant’s salad greens, as well as other vegetables. That relationship has benefitted both parties. Because of Windy Corner’s commitment to buy the greens, Walles was able to invest in a greenhouse to keep lettuces thriving throughout the winter. He grows as many as a dozen different varieties, so that even on the coldest, grayest February days customers at Windy Corner can enjoy salads with a variety of flavors, colors, and textures.

As a neighbor, Walles is thrilled with the restaurant. “It has done so much for this area. I don’t think any of us anticipated how popular it has become.”

Antony Beck, too, is happy he followed his wife’s advice. Sighing that he eats there “too often,” he agrees it’s changed the neighborhood. “It’s created a tremendous community spirit in the whole area.”

That spirit extends to cyclists from throughout the region who have adopted Windy Corner as their own. Bill Fortune, a veteran cyclist who lives in Lexington, said it’s become a regular meeting spot. “We gather there about 7 a.m., ride 25 or 30 miles, and come back for ham biscuits and coffee,” Fortune said. “I love the ambience of the place, the friendliness of the workers, the mural on the side, the little flower garden out back.”

So, after two years, Ouita Michel can laugh about her fear of going bankrupt at Windy Corner. “It’s definitely the most financially successful project Chris and I have opened,” she said.

Beyond that, she said, “it’s fulfilling to feel like you’ve learned something in your career.

“There are still a lot of things I don’t know and things I make mistakes on. But this project, it made me think, ‘I can do this, I figured this out after 10, 20 years.’” 🐛

MORE IN THE OVEN

An even more recent project for Ouita and Chris Michel is the Midway School Bakery, which opened this summer. Located in the renovated Midway School Apartments, the bakery provides baked goods for the Michels’ other restaurants and welcomes retail customers onsite for bagels, doughnuts, scones, and other delights.

Ouita said the bakery fit into a plan. It took the pressure off the restaurant kitchens by moving the baking out and provided an opportunity for a talented baker in their organization.

But that’s not the end. Soon the Michels will open a fish-and-chips franchise at the Bread Box in Lexington. The multi-use building is also home to West Sixth Brewing Company and to FoodChain, a non-profit that will, among other things, use the breweries used grain to grow fish in tanks in the building. Drawn by that super-fresh supply, the Michels signed on to do a counter-only business. Seating will be in the brewery’s tap room.

Will that be enough to keep the Michels busy?

“That will be, I think, probably my last project,” Ouita said.

After a brief pause, she added, “I probably shouldn’t say that.”

