



FOURTH GENERATION: Ryon Thompson, great-grandson of Mrs. Wilkes, reopened the famous restaurant and serves the food that made it so popular — including the biscuits.

His godparents gave him a trip to Europe for a graduation present, and, with his best friend, he visited England and the Scandinavian capitals. Then he spent the winter at a resort in Vale, Colo., “just blowing off steam after graduation” and skiing every day. But when he returned to Savannah six months later, he was no closer to settling on a career than before he left.

That’s when he decided to get a master’s degree in business administration. He waited tables at Mrs. Wilkes Dining Room during the day and went to school at night until he graduated from Georgia Southern University with an MBA.

Ryon (named for Lila Ryon, his paternal great-grandmother) had worked for years part-time in the restaurant on west Jones Street. It was a family business in which each member had specific duties. His grandmother was the bookkeeper and part-time hostess, and his grandfather was the cashier. Ryon’s father and mother ran the restaurant while Sema Wilkes autographed her famous cookbook and chatted with customers.

Mrs. Wilkes died suddenly on October 31, 2002 at age 95. The family was uncertain about the future of the restaurant but decided to continue for the rest of the year and make a final decision in January. (The restaurant closes during January for vacations and to make repairs.)

BY JAMES C. BRYANT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELLI BAXENDALE

New Life for a Savannah Tradition

WHEN RYON THOMPSON was a boy visiting his great-grandmother’s popular fried chicken emporium, people sometimes asked what he wanted to do when he grew up. “I don’t know,” he said, “but I know I don’t want to run a restaurant.”

Today Ryon is 29 and the owner and manager of Mrs. Wilkes Dining Room, a Savannah tradition for more than 60 years.

A native Savannahian, Ryon attended Savannah Country Day School from kindergarten through 12th grade. He attended the University of Georgia and graduated with a general business degree. He still didn’t know what he wanted to do; only that he wanted to work for himself.



PASS THE CHICKEN: Family-style dining is a unique experience at Mrs. Wilkes.

It was a glum meeting when the family drew together to decide what to do. Grandparents Bill and Margie Thompson were retired. Ronny, Ryon's dad, although only 54, was physically unable to continue running the restaurant due to arthritis, and Ryon's younger sister, Emily, had a career of her own.

Ryon's parents and grandparents knew from experience that the work was hard and confining, and they did not want Ryon or Emily to experience the same hard life. But Ryon began to do some mature thinking of his own, partly because of the numerous phone calls they were receiving wanting to know when the restaurant would reopen.

He couldn't bring himself to agree with the rest of the family to close the restaurant forever. "I didn't know if I could take it over, and I wasn't sure I could even do it by myself," Ryon confessed. "I just hated to let the place die.

We had done it for so long, and we felt it wasn't so much a business as it was a part of our lives."

Finally, Ryon made up his mind to take over Mrs. Wilkes Dining Room, despite family objections. "I hated the thought of stopping what we had been doing our whole lives."

Once Ryon made up his mind to "give it a shot," his family promised to help. He set about "streamlining" the operation. He began by serving one meal a day — lunch — from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

He eliminated breakfast and discontinued service on Saturdays. Sometimes he opens on Saturdays for large tour groups and for the annual Tour of Homes.

Ryon has restricted take-out orders and catering services. In the restaurant, he still serves about 18 items for the family-style "lunch," but he reduced the number of meat choices.

Ryon said that despite the changes, he was careful to maintain the food quality and service that made Mrs. Wilkes Dining Room so popular and that won awards at home and abroad.

"The good Southern food brought customers to the restaurant for six decades," he said. "That's why they keep coming, and I didn't want that to change."

But Ryon believes it's more than just the food that keeps the customers coming. "It's the total traditional experience that is unique to this place," he said.

"The family-style service is like something from the past that you cannot find any more. You see people standing in line outside, and they'll enter in groups of 10 without realizing they're going to sit with the people they were standing in line with. They come in and sometimes ask for a table for two. I say, 'We have a table for 10. You have to sit with other people.' They are seated at 10 large oval tables within two cozy dining rooms.

"The first-timers look uneasy and are reluctant to sit down beside strangers, but by the time they've finished eating, they're the best of friends. They're all laughing and listening to each other's stories and telling where they come from. That's part of what makes people enjoy it so much."

Diners at Mrs. Wilkes enjoy interacting with Mrs. Wilkes's family. Although the matriarch is gone, there are still three generations of the family at the restaurant every day.

"My grandfather, who is 89, comes every day, as does my grandmother. She autographs the cookbooks, since she is the one who wrote them. My mom talks to people at each table, making sure everyone is having a good time. My dad is now the head cashier. And I am at the door to greet each person who enters and to escort them to their tables."

That's how Ryon recognizes the occasional celebrities who patronize the restaurant. He has entertained many, including Robert Duvall, Dennis Quaid, Meg Ryan, Kevin Spacey, Gwyneth Paltrow, Walter Cronkite and Willard Scott (who ate seven biscuits).

"Sometimes the celebrities act like they don't want to be recognized," Ryon said, "and sometimes they want to talk to everybody." They sit at the big tables with everybody else since we don't have private rooms."

"One of the best parts of running a

restaurant is the people you get to meet," Ryon said. "It can be fun, despite the hard work."

In the past, when the side door opened at precisely 11 a.m., the first wave of guests entered and sat down. Mrs. Wilkes clanged a hand-held dinner bell and pronounced a blessing before they started eating. Ryon continues his great-grandmother's tradition of saying grace at the first serving. It is the same blessing Mrs. Wilkes recited for 60 years before each meal.

"We try to keep things as close to the way we have always done them as possible because it was what had always worked. It made the place what it was."

One of Ryon's greatest fears when he reopened the dining room in February 2004 was that former customers would come in and complain that the food wasn't as good as it used to be.

"I was afraid they would say we didn't know what we were doing without Mrs. Wilkes here any more." But that hasn't happened, because the same cooks have prepared the food for years. Ryon said they have three generations of cooks, and some of them learned to cook from Mrs. Wilkes. "They make me look good."

When customers ask Ryon about how Mrs. Wilkes' got started, he gives them a brief version that cannot begin to chronicle the hard work that brought international recognition to her dining room.

He said the U.S. government confiscated the Wilkes' farm near Vidalia in 1942 for an air base at the start of World War II. Like other displaced farmers, L.H. Wilkes came to Savannah to work in the shipyards and rented a room in a railroad workers' boarding house on west Jones Street owned by elderly Mrs. Dennis Dixon.

Mrs. Wilkes came down on weekends to stay with her husband. When Mrs. Dixon became ill, Mrs. Wilkes took over cooking for the boarders. In the winter of 1943, Mr. Wilkes began working for the railroad, and Mrs. Wilkes bought the boarding house. At that time, there were about 50 boarding houses in Savannah. The city was a boom town during the war, and there weren't enough public accommodations.

Before long, Mrs. Wilkes gained a reputation among the railroad workers for having the best-tasting food of all the boarding houses in town, and they began flocking to her boarding house, even though they weren't rooming

there. Instead of feeding 12 at her dining table, she began feeding 50 in shifts. She finally closed the boarding house to roomers, remodeled the upstairs rooms into apartments, expanded the dining room and served three meals a day to the public except on Sundays.

Growing up in her shadow, Ryon regards Mrs. Wilkes with awe and a reverence mixed with admiration. "She was such a strong person," he said. "She lost all of her family at a very young age — both of her parents. She raised her brother and married very young at 16. She was married for more than 60 years.

"We've always been a close family, partly because there are so few of us. We work together every day, and we get along very well."

During the 1980s, Savannah's tourism increased dramatically, and Mrs. Wilkes doubled the dining room to seat 80 diners.

In 2000, Mrs. Wilkes' Dining Room was selected by *Conde Nast Traveler* magazine as one of the 50 most distinguished restaurants in the United States.

Today, Ryon gets to work at about 7 a.m. when the experts begin cooking lunch. They do most of the prep work — such as snapping beans and peeling potatoes — the previous afternoon. They cook in huge pots, and it takes from 7 until 11 a.m. to get lunch ready for the first wave of diners.

Surprisingly, Ryon never eats at his own restaurant. He and his recent bride eat out a lot. "People tease me when they see us eating at another restaurant," Ryon said. "So this is where you eat," they say. But everybody likes variety."

Ryon eats breakfast before he goes to work. He skips lunch, and he doesn't cook.

"When you're around food and cooking food all day, you don't want to go home and cook for yourself," he explained.

Now that Ryon has been working for himself and as the new "Mrs. Wilkes," he has a deep appreciation for his parents and grandparents who have supported him in the venture.

"How many young people right out of college get a business opportunity like this one handed to them?" he asked. "It gives me a sense of pride that I'm now doing what my family has done for more than 60 years. It makes me feel good when people come in and thank me for reopening Mrs. Wilkes Dining Room." ■