



# GOODBYE CHASTEEN'S

**The Chasteen family reflects on their 40 years in the Lake City restaurant business.** | By KAYLA LOKEINSKY

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alking up to the counter at Chasteen's Downtown, you could always expect to find Robert Chasteen faithfully stationed at the cash register while his wife, Emmie, worked behind the counter taking phone orders and packing up to-go boxes.

The line to order, which usually reached the back of the restaurant, was filled with familiar faces. Old friends, acquaintances and family members all milled together, saying hello and trying to decide if they should try a slice of one of Emmie's delicious cakes or whether they should order squash casserole or macaroni and cheese.

A Lake City staple, Chasteen's served customers and friends for 18 years. On July 14, they closed their doors for the last time, marking the end of a food dynasty in the community.

Robert, 71, and Emmie, 69, decided it was time to retire. From their early days at their first restaurant, Robert's Dock, to the loyal customers flooding the Chasteen's Downtown dining room during the lunch rush, they have been in the restaurant business for nearly 40 years. They're ready to take some time for themselves, and they have certainly earned it.

"We're ready and it's time," Emmie said.



Robert Chasteen takes orders at the register during the lunch rush while Emmie Chasteen takes a phone order behind him. The couple works as a team to run their popular neighborhood restaurant.



Robert and Emmie Chasteen are pictured with their three daughters, Abbie Chasteen (from left), Mary Anne Pearson and Lisa Odom. The entire family was present for Chasteen's final day of operation, with all three daughters working alongside their parents for the last time. (Photo Courtesy of Abbie Chasteen)

## Ready For Retirement

Chasteen's Downtown has become an iconic restaurant in the downtown area since it opened in 1999. After 18 years of making some of the finest food in Lake City, the Chasteens are ready to settle into the slower pace of retirement living.

"We've never really had a whole lot of time at home," Emmie said. "We've had our weekends since we've been here but we're the kind of people where we enjoy home. We do, we love home. We love our family. We like to cook for them. We enjoy being outside and things like that and we have all kinds of things that we like to do."

They don't have any set plans for how they'll fill up all their newfound free time, and they're just fine with that.

"We'll find us something to do, we just don't know what yet," Robert said.

One thing they do know is they're still going to remain active and maintain a presence in the community they love.

"We definitely want to stay busy because I still feel like I can contribute," Emmie said. "As long as I'm healthy and able I'm not going to just sit. We're not those kinds of people. I feel like we're happiest when we have a project going on."

"I feel like I need to say, 'Today I've done something,'" Robert added.

The Chasteens don't plan on doing any catering or selling their Take-And-Bake dishes during their retirement years, just cooking in their own kitchen.

"We had really thought we were going to do the Take-And-Bake when we retired but it's just too much," Robert said.

Robert and Emmie's three daughters, Abbie, Mary Ann and Lisa, have all worked alongside their parents at one point in their lives. Growing up they all worked at Robert's Dock, and on Chasteen's Downtown's final day of operation, all three daughters worked behind the counter for the last time.

"The restaurant business has always been a huge part of our lives," Mary Ann said.

For them, their parents' retirement is bittersweet. While they're sad to see such a huge part of their lives go away, they're even happier for their parents that they will finally get some time to themselves.

"I think once they don't have this responsibility, things will change for them," Abbie said. "When they don't have to wake up at the crack of dawn. They'll be able to relax a little more and do things at their own pace."

**"The restaurant business has always been a huge part of our lives." — Mary Ann Pearson**



## Taking A Look Back

The Chasteens opened Robert's Dock in February 1978 out on the east end of U.S. Highway 90. Located on the outskirts of Lake City, it's where they got their start in the local restaurant business, but they wanted to move closer to the heart of the city.

"We always really wanted to come to the downtown area," Robert said. "But we did good business out there for a long time."

They were able to move into their current location and open Chasteen's in 1999, but there was a year gap in-between closing Robert's Dock and opening their new restaurant. So, in the meantime they opened Chasteen's Sandwiches and Such in Gateway Plaza on U.S. Highway 90. While Chasteen's Downtown was getting ready to be opened, Robert and Emmie sold sandwiches and salads in their small, temporary space.

"I often said if we had been in a different time of our lives where we didn't have children in college and all we could've kept right on staying there," Emmie said. "But people wouldn't let the Buffalo Bites rest."

Buffalo Bites are by far the most popular item on Chasteen's menu. Lightly fried boneless chicken coated in the secret buffalo sauce recipe, the Buffalo Bites make up a large portion of orders at the restaurant. Although they were on the menu at Robert's Dock, they didn't become as popular until they started being served at Chasteen's Downtown.

"Our buffalo sauce is not like anybody else's," Emmie said.

**"...people wouldn't let the buffalo bites rest."**

— Emmie Chasteen

Although Buffalo Bites aren't what the Chasteen family craves, that's what the people want. When it comes to what's on their own dinner table, they prefer grilled chicken and salmon, mashed potatoes and fresh vegetables.

"We try to eat a little bit healthy," Emmie said.

"We're not your Buffalo Bites and macaroni and cheese eaters," Abbie added.

While people have asked for the sacred, secret recipe, the Chasteens aren't planning on giving it up anytime soon.

"You can give it to somebody but they can't make it because they can't buy the stuff to make it with in the store," Robert said.

"But buffalo bites might not be gone forever," Abbie said with a smile.

## A Bittersweet Goodbye

In late June after Chasteen's announced that its doors would be closing on July 14, hundreds of people reached out on Facebook and in person to tell the Chasteens how much they would miss them and their cooking, but that they were happy that Robert and Emmie could finally relax.

Emmie and Robert were overwhelmed by the love and support they received from the Lake City community.

"We can't even begin to express our feelings," Emmie said. "We are just thrilled that we have been part of this com-

**FROM TOP:** Chasteen's most popular menu items include the Buffalo Bites, their mac and cheese, and their broccoli salad.



munity and we have been able to feed so many people and make so many friends.”

According to Robert, running a restaurant is one of the hardest things to do. But in spite of all the difficulties he’s had to face over the years, he’s grateful for the people he’s met during his years of owning a business.

“There’s been ups and downs,” Robert said. “There’s hard times, there’s good time, but the best times I think have been the people that we’ve met.”

It’s these people whom they’ve met and fed a countless number of times that the Chasteens will miss most.

“I can’t begin to tell you all the nice people and friends we’ve made,” Emmie said. “I will really miss all the people.”

Like her parents, Abbie is also going to miss the customers that she has gotten to know throughout the years. Since before she

could even see over the tables at Robert’s Dock, Abbie has been walking around her parents’ restaurants and talking to customers. But, she knows the Chasteen family dinners will continue on.

“Fortunately mom and dad built a really big kitchen in their house,” Abbie said. “I have a feeling there will be a lot of Chasteen family meals with friends at their home.”

For the Chasteens, the closing of their restaurant is bittersweet. While Robert and Emmie enjoy their retirement years, they know that this isn’t the end, but just the beginning of something new.

“I have to think of it as starting something new,” Emmie said. “I can’t think of it as ending. I can’t think of it as my life is ending or something. I’ve got to think that it’s the beginning of a new chapter.”

## Chasteen’s Famous Macaroni & Cheese

### Ingredients:

- 6 c. cooked macaroni noodles
- 3 c. shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 (12 oz.) can evaporated milk
- 1 ½ c. whole milk
- 3 eggs, slightly beaten
- 1 ½ c. cheddar cheese sauce



### Directions:

1. Mix together the cooked macaroni and 1 ½ c. shredded cheddar cheese. Pour into a greased 9 x 13 pan.
2. In a saucepan, heat evaporated milk and whole milk until warm.
3. Add 3 eggs (slightly beaten) and blend well with wire whip.
4. Add cheese sauce to the mixture and blend well.
5. Pour this mixture over the macaroni and top with remaining shredded cheddar cheese.
6. Cover with foil and bake at 350° for approximately 45 minutes. Remove foil and brown for approximately 10 minutes.

**ABOVE LEFT:** Emmie Chasteen whips up some cake batter before the restaurant opens. Emmie is known for her homemade desserts and cakes. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Robert Chasteen and his daughter Lisa prepare Robert’s mother’s Fresh Corn Relish recipe.