



*Brandi Wheeler (left) and original founding partner JoAnn Corbett at The French Hens in Manning.*

Sometimes, things are just meant to be. Ask Brandi Wheeler, owner of The French Hens café and gift shop in Manning.

Four years ago, JoAnn Corbett and two friends opened a little gift shop and named it Three French Hens. “I’d always wanted to own a shop,” says JoAnn. “After my husband died and I gave the business to our children, I was able to do it. We carried lamps, gift items and even accent furniture. We had a ball!”

In 2007, Three French Hens moved to its present location in the old Brailsford Grocery on West Boyce Street in downtown Manning. Since the site had once been a restaurant and still had a kitchen, the trio decided to offer light lunch items—salads and sandwiches and a few desserts. The decision was a good one: Tempted by key lime coconut cake, pecan praline cake and other indulgent sweets as well as fantastic chicken salad and made-to-order sandwiches, hungry locals and visitors flocked to the cafe.

Fast forward a year or so. One of JoAnn’s original partners had left the business and the other was ready to retire. Brandi, a Manning resident and paralegal, meanwhile was seriously contemplating her own lifelong dream of owning a restaurant. One day, JoAnn—who happened to be Brandi’s next-door neighbor—asked whether Brandi by any chance knew

# Let’s Meet In Manning

## *Good Food, Gift Items & Southern Charm At The French Hens*

Article by Katie McElveen ❖ Photos by Bill Rogers

of someone who might be interested in buying into the business. After talking with her husband, Brandi called JoAnn to tell her yes, she did know someone—herself. “I had been a paralegal for 20 years,” Brandi says with a smile. “Now, finally, I was going to get to do what I loved!”

With Brandi more than willing to put her well-honed, self-taught culinary skills to work, the pair



*Brandi prepares fresh asparagus.*

quickly decided to add a hot lunch special to the menu each day and a hot soup during the winter months. Since there's no set menu, Brandi can be as creative as she wants. "I wake up in the morning and think to myself, 'What do I feel like cooking today?' Then I head to the market and see what looks good."

The daily specials tend toward southern favorites like ribs, chicken casserole, macaroni and cheese, fried squash and butter beans, but Brandi and JoAnn also have served roasted asparagus, jambalaya and other delights with great success. Banana pudding fashioned from real custard and topped with a cloud of meringue, another new addition, usually is gone before the lunch crowd leaves.

One special, fried liver and onions, is so popular that Brandi calls a few of her regulars a couple of days before she'll be serving it to let them know, so they can inform their liver-loving friends. "We'll end up serving 25 or 30 orders," she says. "It's really popular. I wasn't so sure if it would be, but since it's something I enjoy I figured other people would, too. Looks like there are a lot of us!"

The café offers casseroles and whole cakes to go and can cater events, either onsite or at another location. Since the restaurant is open until 5, it's convenient for regulars to pick up dinner on the way home.

JoAnn recently retired, leaving Brandi sole owner of The French Hens. But many things will never change. The legendary chicken salad is made the same way it was when the café opened (although the ladies

won't part with the recipe, Brandi does admit one of the secret ingredients is cream cheese), as is JoAnn's famous pecan praline cake. "Like everything here, we make it homemade," says JoAnn, who created the recipe after tasting the cake at a friend's house. "She wouldn't give me the recipe, so I went home and went to work. It took a few tries, but I finally got it right!"

## CHICKEN CASSEROLE

- 1 bag of large egg noodles
- 1/2 can of cream of chicken soup
- 1/2 can of cream of celery soup
- 1 can of cream of mushroom soup
- 2 cups cooked diced chicken
- 1 small container of cottage cheese
- 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese
- 1/2 bag of Stove Top Stuffing mix

Combine all of the ingredients in a bowl. Mix well and spread into a 9x13 glass pan. Cook in oven on 350 for 20 minutes.

## FRENCH HENS ASPARAGUS

- Asparagus
- Olive oil
- Margarita salt

Steam asparagus for three minutes. Place on pan; coat with olive oil and sprinkle with margarita salt. Place in the oven on broil for approximately three minutes.

## COPPER PENNIES

- 2 cans of cooked carrots, drained
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 1 bell pepper, finely chopped
- 1 can tomato soup
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 3/4 cups cider vinegar
- 1 teaspoon yellow mustard
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

Place carrots, onions and peppers in a bowl. Mix together all remaining ingredients and pour over carrot mixture. Refrigerate and let sit overnight.

## PRALINE ICING

*Although The French Hens won't part with the exact instructions for its Praline Cake, it is willing to share the recipe for the frosting. You'll find it transforms just about any cake into something special.*

- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 stick butter (not margarine)
- 4 cups powdered sugar
- 1/2 cup milk
- 1 1/2 cups finely chopped pecans

Melt butter and brown sugar on medium heat. Gradually add powdered sugar and milk as needed to stir in sugar. Cook for 5 minutes or until slow boil. Add pecans and stir until completely mixed. ❖

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*Bill Rogers is executive director of the S.C. Press Association and a freelance photographer in Columbia.*