

ONE SMART **C O O K I E**

How One Woman is Using Her Restaurant Success for the Greater Good

By Danielle Davies

There are three big reasons to visit a restaurant during Atlantic City's Restaurant Week: good food, good wine and good prices. But at one Margate establishment, what's happening behind the scenes is as interesting as what you'll find on your plate.

While planning your visits to local eateries during Atlantic City's Restaurant Week, be sure to put Steve & Cookie's By The Bay on your itinerary. The food is consistently delicious—think Maine Lobster Macaroni and Cheese or Grilled Lamb Lollochops as starters. Five separate seating areas offer a choice of atmosphere. Add a comprehensive wine list and restaurant week prices, and you've got yourself a winner.

You could visit Steve & Cookie's for these reasons alone, but they are just part of what makes it a must-visit restaurant. Steve & Cookie's has one thing you definitely won't find anywhere else—Caroline "Cookie" Till. When Till made the move from product development at Campbell's Soup Company to the restaurant business 25 years ago, she brought with her a graduate degree in nutrition from Drexel University, some waitressing experience, and not much else.

"That was a big decision in my life," Till said of the move. And yet she has managed to turn Steve & Cookies By The Bay into one of the best restaurants around.

Till has also used the success of Steve & Cookie's as a platform to reach out to the Margate community and beyond and she has started several healthy eating and living initiatives in the area. With her background in nutrition, Till has always been interested in how food and lifestyle affect health.

"So many times, health relates back to diet," she said.

"People don't seem to know where their food comes from. If you can break that cycle at a young age, you have a fighting chance."

While the popularity of going green has many people talking the talk these days, Till walks the walk. At a time when childhood obesity has become epidemic in our nation and fresh food initiatives are proliferating, Till's forward thinking is perfectly aligned, making her causes not just admirable but wildly successful.

She started five years ago with the Tighe Ross School. While attending a meeting of the Northeast Organic Farm Organization, Till met Mike Azzara, then Outreach Director for the organization. Azzara had been working to establish gardens within some elementary schools in Lawrenceville and offered to help Till do the same thing here. Till already had a school and teacher in mind—the Tighe-Ross School Complex in Margate, and an elementary school teacher named Jessica Cuevas. Armed with enthusiasm, resource and a slide show, Till, Azzara and Cuevas met with Margate's superintendent. As luck would have it, the school had an unused courtyard available for a garden.

Fate continued to be on their side and they received a \$2,000 grant from the Department of Agriculture to create the school garden. Just like that, everything came together. Cuevas started with her third grade class and was able to tie the garden into the curriculum, using it for math, science, cooking and art lessons.

The garden continues to thrive, and kids want to stay involved. "They just eat it up," Till said, "and it's amazing what has spawned off the garden." Parents and their children have been creating their own backyard gardens as well as maintaining the Tighe school garden all summer long. The students take the produce to the Margate Community Farmer's Market and make it available on a donation basis. With their profits, the students go grocery shopping



at ShopRite and donate their purchases to the food bank. "The kids love it," said Till. "Now they're asking, what else can we do?"

Till has plenty of ideas. The AtlantiCare Foundation, of which Till is a board member, is interested in sponsoring gardens in schools. Till and the Foundation are committed to enlisting ten new schools to be part of their updated Healthy Schools Initiative. The goal is to assist schools in establishing and maintaining their own school gardens.

While she works to educate the very young and those who teach them about the origins of their food and how food choices affect their health, Till also aims to make fresh food available to those around her. In fact, she is such a champion of fresh food that she has coordinated with local farmers to host a farmer's market every Thursday throughout the summer. The Margate Community Farmers Market is located right on Steve & Cookie's parking lot at 9700 Amherst Avenue in Margate and runs from 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM, offering an array of local produce, baked goods, flowers and more.

Till's efforts put her in good company. Just last year, First Lady Michelle Obama established the first White House vegetable garden since Eleanor Roosevelt's Victory Garden in World War II. Part of the First Lady's efforts to encourage healthy eating and exercise and reduce obesity, the White House Garden involves local students in the planting, harvesting, and even cooking of their produce. According to the White House website, produce will be cooked in the White House kitchen and then delivered to



Caroline
"Cookie" Till

Miriam's Kitchen, which serves the homeless in Washington, DC.

The popularity of the White House Garden has spurred a growth of gardens nationwide. But when the whole nation seems to be 'going green', it can be hard to determine which initiatives to get behind. What is authentic and lasting versus trendy and trite?

Till is not just spouting rhetoric. She puts her money where her mouth is. Consider this: Steve & Cookie's is one of only two restaurants in New Jersey that are certified by the Green Restaurant Association, an honor earned by scoring high on a rigorous point system. According to the Green Restaurant Association website, the point system covers seven categories including energy, water, waste, disposables, chemical and pollution reduction, sustainable food, and sustainable furnishings and building materials. In addition, restaurants must have a full-scale recycling program, be free of all Styrofoam, and have an annual education program to meet certification standards.

Steve & Cookie's has worked hard to achieve this hard-to-earn status over the last five years, yet Till remains modest, pointing out that they still have work to do. Steve & Cookie's has achieved a two out of a possible four star status from the Association. Still, there is no restaurant in New Jersey with a higher standing. For Till, achieving and maintaining green status is an ongoing thing. She's not just doing this for kicks. This is the way she wants to live.

Till's current big project is the Boys and Girls Club Life Skills Kitchen in Atlantic City. While visiting the club location on Pennsylvania Avenue, Till noticed an area that looked canteen-like to her and she immediately envisioned a kitchen there—not a commercial kitchen but a Life Skills kitchen, a way to help kids learn their way around a real home kitchen as well as the lessons including sanitation and organization, using appliances, and stocking and storing foods, not to mention cooking itself. All of this in addition to seeing more food in its natural state.

She mentioned her idea to Shane Bargy, Executive Director of the Boys and Girls Club of Atlantic City, asking him, "If it didn't cost you a dime, would you want something like this?" With Bargy on board, Till began making calls. Everyone



she spoke to was interested, and even better, they were happy to donate supplies and time. Local businesses, tradesmen and firefighters all pitched in, and after adopting an aggressive schedule, they accomplished a finished kitchen in record time. As a way to roll out the Life Skills Kitchen as well as to promote Atlantic City Restaurant Week, local chefs will be teaching kids to cook. In a hands-on cooking experience that will have grown-up foodies begging to participate, the Boys and Girls Club is pairing small groups of kids with a different chef each Wednesday from January 6 through March 3 to cook a meal together in their new Life Skills Kitchen. Till would love for the project to be extended into an ongoing arrangement. For now, participating restaurants include Steve & Cookies, Los Amigos, Pistol Pete's, Sage, Ram's Head, Trump Marina, and Buddakan.

Of the Los Amigos visit, Till said, "I couldn't tell who was having more fun, the two guys from Los Amigos or the kids. They were having a ball."

It's hard to imagine that Till has bigger plans, but she does. Her goal, more than just success for this one location, is for all this to become a pilot project. As with any endeavor so big, the fear is that "if it doesn't get going right away, then it doesn't take off," according to Till. "It dies and that's the worst thing that can happen. Yet it seems like the ball is starting to roll." With AtlantiCare, Stockton Community Partners, and ACCC Culinary School all interested in exposing

kids to healthy eating options, there seem to be several win-win-win situations in the making in and around Atlantic City.

Fortunately for Till and for those of us benefiting from her initiatives, she has surrounded herself with excellent employees, allowing her the freedom to pursue projects outside of her restaurant. She feels enormously fortunate to have a successful restaurant and people around her who "have her back," she said. Some, like Chef Kevin Kelly and Sous Chef Warner Christy, have been with her from the beginning.

Till is someone who has the extraordinary ability to get big things accomplished. And while she hopes to inspire other people to participate, saying that she can't do it all herself, she feels compelled to continue without or without them. Here in South Jersey, she is most certainly affecting change.

Keep it up, Ms. Till, and thank you.

