

# Two Native Women Open Steakhouse in Fort Towson, Oklahoma

*Native American entrepreneurs Cathie Carothers and Judy Fuhrhop join to operate a fine dining steakhouse at the historic Fort Towson, Oklahoma, Railroad Depot.*

FORT TOWSON, OKLAHOMA, UNITED STATES, March 17, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A culinary collaboration with cultural overtones has opened in historic Fort Towson, Oklahoma. Cherokee Visionary Cathie Carothers and Choctaw Chef Judy Fuhrhop combine business savvy with great cooking skills to bring fine dining to Choctaw County with the opening of the Fort Towson Depot Steakhouse, located in the Railroad Depot. When



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*Judy Fuhrhop*

their relatives walked the Trail of Tears, they were unlikely to imagine that almost 200 years later their Cherokee and Choctaw great-granddaughters would establish one of the first women-owned, native-owned steakhouses in Indian Territory, but that's what has happened.

Fort Towson, located in the Eastern part of Choctaw County is approximately a two hour drive from Dallas. The town derives its name from the original Fort Towson military installation on the east side of the town. Established in 1824, the fort was a termination point for native people being relocated to Indian Territory. Moreover, Brigadier General Stand Watie, the last Confederate General to surrender at the end of the American Civil War, did so just West of Fort Towson at Doaksville, which served for more than a decade in the early 1800s as the first capital of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. All that history adds to the tapestry of the new, native owned fine dining location.

The Depot Steakhouse features a white table cloth setting with cook to order steaks, creative appetizers, vintage wines, and homemade desserts. Customers can experience high-end cuisine without having to drive from rural Oklahoma to an urban center like Dallas or Oklahoma City.

The steakhouse was the brainchild of Cathie Carothers. Both of her maternal grandparents are original enrollees on the Dawes' Rolls and she is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. Cathie spent her professional years working in the Bureau of Indian Affairs and then as the Director of Indian Education for the United States Department of Education, serving under seven different Presidents before retiring from Federal service in 2010. She then served as an Assistant State Superintendent in the District of Columbia and a Deputy State Superintendent for Indian Policy and Education in New Mexico before relocating to Oklahoma. She traveled extensively in

her job and had the chance to sample outstanding dining locations all across the United States. When it came time to retire in 2013, Cathie and her husband decided to take advantage of the peaceful lifestyle offered by Lake Raymond Gary, the no-wake lake located on the edge of Fort Towson. Her post-retirement plan was to have a restaurant of her own.

Her first restaurant project in Fort Towson was the R.G. Trading Post I, located on the grounds of the abandoned Texaco station in the middle of town. However, she soon noticed that the Fort Towson Depot building was empty and in need of repairs that the town did not have the ability to finance. She imagined using that space to create a destination steakhouse to serve both the local market and the increasing number of travelers headed to and from the nearby, ever-expanding Hochatown/Broken Bow area. After extensive renovations, including a complete reimagining of what had been designed as the lobby and passenger waiting areas of the Depot, the space now sports crystal chandeliers, classically patterned wall paper, and custom drapery.

“I wanted a fine dining spot to eat,” Cathie explains. “The Raymond Gary Lake attracts people from all over who enjoy its quiet, scenic beauty. Ending an idyllic day with a relaxing meal makes the experience even more special.” Cathie’s vision for the restaurant is apparent from the color choices for the fabric chair covers to the custom drink names to the laser inscribed boxes for delivering the check at the end of the meal. The dining room and the menu would be equally at home in any urban center, but it provides a culinary treat for the local food customers.

The restaurant was supposed to open in the fall of 2020, but COVID intervened. The custom grill was back ordered because of supply chain problems. The table ware was stuck on a ship in harbor in California. Everything she needed to get the steakhouse from concept to execution fell victim to the COVID disruption. However, all the pieces finally came together and she was able to open for business in late August of 2022. That inconvenient delay had a silver lining. During the delay, Cathie became acquainted with another recent resident of Fort Towson, Judy Fuhrhop, or Chef Judy, as she is now known.

Judy grew up “just up the road” from Fort Towson in Durant, Oklahoma, but her Choctaw County roots extend back to the arrival of her Choctaw ancestors from their ancestral lands in Mississippi on the Trail of Tears. In fact, her Choctaw grandfather is buried in the Historic Grant Cemetery, approximately ten miles further West. When it came time to retire, Judy and her husband wanted to come home to the Choctaw part of Oklahoma. They were on a weekend drive when they found a picturesque home for sale on the shore of Lake Raymond Gary and knew they had found their place to call home. “We fell in love with that view of the lake and put in an offer that same day,” she explains.

“After my husband and I had our first dinner at the Depot Steakhouse, I approached Cathie and asked if I could join her in the kitchen,” Judy says. “I immediately saw the potential for the restaurant and realized I could get back into the food industry.” Four months after that first discussion, Cathie’s vision for a steakhouse and Judy’s dream of stepping back into the kitchen combined to put the two of them in charge of a business that is gathering steam with each

passing week.

The Depot Steakhouse is not Judy's first restaurant experience, either. She ran a successful sandwich shop and catering business in Sabine Pass, Texas for three years. She then relocated to the Fort Worth area where she ran a kitchen design and remodeling business. For eleven years, she was organizer and coordinator of the annual food show, Zestfest, in Dallas-Fort Worth. However, while those activities kept her near a kitchen, she always dreamed of returning to a restaurant kitchen and cooking for customers again. She made do with cooking custom desserts for family and friends, with her classic buttermilk pie becoming a neighborhood favorite.

Judy says, "I grew up with my grandmother and learned to cook in her kitchen; then honed my skills under the tutelage of Mrs. Winona Boatner, who was an icon of Home Economics education at Southeastern Oklahoma State University," she says. In other words, Chef Judy says, "I am Grandma trained, not culinary school trained."

Grandma training puts culinary training to shame in Judy's creative menu specials, custom steak-rub, and homemade desserts.

The steakhouse is open on Friday night and Saturday night for menu service, plus Sunday for an all-you-can-eat brunch buffet, complete with the ability to order the always-necessary mimosa. Starting in late April, they will also open on Thursday evenings, as requested by customers. During the week, they host special events and business meetings in the Depot. They also provide custom catering. Ever mindful of their connection to the community, they collaborate with the local Volunteer Fire Department to provide Sunday meals to some of the elderly residents in Fort Towson, donate to the local school activities, and participate in local charity events.

Their Indian ancestors are undoubtedly proud.

Sharla J. Frost

Fort Towson Depot Steakhouse

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