

In Good Taste

with Sheryl Popp

Keith Family All Sail in Same Boat at Keith's Marina



L-R: Bottom Row, Brad Keith, Tom Keith, Robert Keith & Dan Keith. Seated in Boat L-R: Pat Keith, Brian Keith, Steve Keith and Bob Fuchs.

When Robert and Joy Keith bought Gonring's Resort on Big Cedar Lake, they would most likely have been amazed if anyone told them their family would end up with a marina employing them, their children and their grandchildren.

The Keiths lived in Milwaukee and Robert was in auto sales. He wanted to move out of the city, and since he had also sold outboard motors, the purchase of Gonring's seemed a good fit. The business, renamed Keith's Resort, did boat rentals and ran a bar and a restaurant. In 1972, the family acquired a Mercury Outboard franchise, and went into the boat business, using the resort's old dance hall as the marina. The family kept the resort until 1990, when the Keith boys decided they did not want to be in the bar business, and would rather focus on boating. They had acquired a Sylvan franchise in 1979, a Smoker Craft franchise in 1980

and a Maxim franchise in 1988. Obviously, they needed more space and when the resort was sold, they moved to their present location on Highway 33. The eight-acre facility has 20,000 sq. ft. of showroom space, with 240 boats on display, and an additional 40,000 sq. ft. of warehouse space.

Four of the Keith brothers, Tom, Dan, Steve and Tim, entered the family business when they were 18. Pat Keith worked at Kohl's for 20 years, and returned to the resort in 1987, where he took over the accounting functions from his mother, and helped run the resort. After the move, business doubled in three years, and the family acquired a Bayliner franchise in 1993. They have remained an exclusive Mercury Marine (motor) dealer, and settled into selling the four lines of boats mentioned above. Business is good, relays Tom Keith. The location, their large showrooms, the Bayliner franchise, and more peo-

ple taking up boating have combined to do well for the family, including the third generation: Brian Keith is a certified Mercury outboard and Merc Cruiser mechanic and Brad Keith runs the fishing boat rigging department. In 2001, the sons bought Robert out of the business, although he still goes to work every day at age 84.

"There's a comfort zone for our customers from having been in business for 30 years and having family carry it on," said Tom. "Our repeat business is tremendous. It's not like going to buy a car and never seeing the same salesman again. We have multi-generational customers, too. Our relationship with our dealers is excellent as well, because we've been exclusive with them. We can get parts for older boats a lot of other companies can't, for one example. And we have the financial resources to buy in quantity when companies have a good deal, or year end close outs and

we can pass those savings along to our customers."

I usually like to ask how a business has changed, and was very interested in Tom's reply. "Boat quality in the last 15 years has dramatically increased, motors too. Engines are now four-stroke, to meet government environmental regulations." (That means they're cleaner burning, smokeless, start better, are very quiet and get better gas economy.) "Boats were just like cars," added Tom, "as automobile quality improved because of imports, so did boats." Keith's customers come from a 100 mile radius, including many from Chicago. Chicago customers even utilize Keith's winter boat storage option. (They can store about 100 boats.)

Tom is very happy he's grown up in a business where everyone has learned from the ground floor up. "It's not like taking over an existing business. We built it our-

selves." But the family still works hard to stay on top of the learning process. They (usually Tom) go to every manufacturer's boat meeting, every year, all over the country. Everyone in the family boats of course, and most either fish or enjoy water sports. They also do two large trade shows a year, taking 50 boats to the Milwaukee Marine Association's January Boat Show (Tom is on their board of directors), and 20 boats to the Journal Sentinel Sports show in March. Further, Keith's Marina is the only dealer in the metro area open seven days a week, until September, and their awards testify to that strategy. They've been the largest Sylvan pontoon dealer in the world the last three years, a top 10 Sylvan Smoker dealer over the last ten years (internationally), and a top 50 Bayliner dealer consecutively over the last 10 years. Oh yes, they've been a Mercury dealer Congress award winner for 18 of the last 25 years (in the top 50 dealerships in the U.S.). It's hard to find a wall in the showrooms not adorned with plaques. "But," said Tom, "we spend a lot of money advertising too. It's true that you have to spend it to make it."

Keith's Marina is located at 4339 Hwy. 33 West in West Bend. The phone is 262-334-9389 and you can learn more by going to keithsmarina.com In addition to boat and motor sales, Keith's Marina has a complete service department and sells accessories as well. They are open Mon. through Fri. from 9am until 5pm, Sat. from 9am until 2pm and Sun. from 11am until 2pm.

This recipe is from Tom's wife, Eileen. One of my favorites.

Eileen's Brushetta

1 can petite cut diced tomatoes, well drained

1-2 cloves fresh crushed garlic

1/4 tsp. fresh or dried basil

1 Tbls. olive oil

Parmesan cheese-optional

Mix and chill first four ingredients and sprinkle with freshly shredded Parmesan cheese, if desired. Serve on toasted bread or garlic crackers and enjoy!