

People in the food service industry tend to move around. Just like you may not be sure where your favorite banker or Realtor will be next time you need them, the same is true with restaurant folks.

So with that in mind, I thought I would let you know where some various people are these days. This isn't everyone. It's merely a list of who comes to mind right now.

Chuck Ferrell is still making some of the best barbecue in Opelika at Chuck's. He's been at it over 30 years now.

Another long-term warrior is Joe Hippely at the Warehouse Bistro. He and Vinnie do a great job at the spot Mary Nan McCullough founded many years ago.

Some others that have been at it a while are Mac & Jo at Barnes Openhearth Restaurant. It's up highway 29 near Valley. Mac's mighty good at cutting and grilling steaks. And Jo's learning about wine.

Another guy who's been at it a long time is Reed Compton. He was in the steak house business. His latest venture, Firehouse Subs, seems to fit him well.

John Sellers fits the long-timer mode, too. He has been running Provino's for many years now.

Keeley and Matt still do their thing at Niffer's Place. It's namesake, Mark Niffenegger, is a Sysco Foods guy now.

Speaking of Sysco, one the best real chefs I know now works for Sysco. That's Hank Gilmer. Hank's one of the biggest "has beens" I know. He has been at more places than most anybody. He is very good at what he does today.

Another x-chef that's still around is Matt Schultz. Matt was at The Hungry Hunter way back when. Now he has a restaurant supply business based here.

In downtown Opelika you will find Pat Hamby at Cottage Café. Around the corner are John Robert Wood and Eron Bass at Café 123. In the

next block of 8th street is The Breezeway. They also have a spot in Auburn.

Jimmy's is back toward the railroad. I am proud to say that Trey Dorsey is now with us. Trey was at The Bistro before Joe and later was at Saugahatchee.

A new restaurant that just opened in downtown Opelika is Alpen Café and Bakery. The chef there is Isaiah Powell. Diane Ragle is on pastry duty. They specialize in German fare. The bakery has fresh breads, strudels and desserts. They are open at 11 Tuesday through Saturday.

My friends Chris and Mark moved Christopher to Lake Martin. It's located at Blue Creek on highway 49. Each of them was in Jimmy's recently and said they are enjoying "the lake."

The Reyes family operates Laredo. Miguel, Barbara and Arturo bring Mexican goodies to us everyday. Tino Rodriguez and his brothers do the same at Durango.

On the Chinese and Thai side, Allen at Mandarin House does a great job. His experience and expertise is evident when you visit him.

Clay Hall has been at it a while at Mikata. He has a team of chefs that perform regularly. Clay also operates Juliana Tokyo in downtown Auburn.

Another downtown Auburn stalwart is Greg Bradshaw. You can find him at Mellow Mushroom or Bodega. At The Pita Pit you may see my friend Rex Ponder. He gave up landscaping a few years ago and took up fixin' food for others.

Around the corner on Magnolia you find Leonardo Maurelli at Zazu. Not too far away is Amsterdam Café. David Bancroft does a fine job there. He's got Adam McPheeters helping him.

Auburn is also home to Arricia. John Hamme is the executive chef at the AU Hotel. He's always doing good stuff. Kip and Billy do their thing at Block and Barrel out by the airport.

My friend Collin Donnelly is now behind the stoves at Nancy Patterson's Bistro in Montgomery. Visit him the next time you are over there.

As to some others that are no longer around, Thom Kindos is still in the Destin area. Last word had it he's not cooking these days. I don't know where Craig McNeil is or what he's doing.

A fellow I am very proud of is Roy Chambers. Roy worked with us at Jimmy's and moved from washing dishes to learning to cook. Now he's running the kitchen at Applebee's in Auburn.

The next time you visit a restaurant, take the time to get to know the chef or the person running the place. You will become a real person to them. That relationship will payoff for you in the future.

After all that information overload, here's a little more that should interest you.

In the chain or multi-location part of the restaurant business there are lots of players. In fact there are over 400 sizable operations with lots more little ones out there.

Who are the really big ones? What kind of sales do these folks have?

One segment is occupied by the pizza boys. The big player there is Pizza Hut. Others are Domino's and Papa John's. Put those folks together and you have annual sales of \$25 billion. That's lots of dough.

Another group are the sandwich shops and bakery types. There's a bunch of those people – Quizno's, Subway, Panera and the like. Put all of those together and they have about \$27 billion in annual sales.

A third segment is comprised of chicken spots. KFC is number one. Add all their sales and you also get around \$27 billion.

For the fourth group let's look at casual dining restaurants like Applebee's and Chili's. Sales for this group are near the same \$27 billion.

If you put all of these popular types together, you will have sales of a little over \$100 billion annually. That's a sizable amount.

But let's not forget the burger guys. The undisputed leader is McDonalds. Burger King, Wendy's and all the others are way back in the pack behind the giant.

By the way the total sales of the burger group (are you ready?): \$112 billion dollars. The burger people sell more than the other four put together.

Just in case you are interested, McDonald's share of the burger sales market happens to be \$70 billion – nearly the same as ALL the pizza, chicken and sandwich chains put together.

Next time you get hungry, give one of us local folks a try. You'll be glad you did and so will we.