



QUEEN OF STEAK

WAS IT WRITTEN IN THE STARS, OR DID DALLAS' QUEEN OF STEAK, DEE LINCOLN, CARVE OUT HER OWN FUTURE, FORTUNE AND FAME?

By Michele Axley

Let's just say the Cajun-born, natural beauty was blessed with a boatload of street smarts, an unusual affinity for work, tons of charisma and being in the right place at the right time. A deadly combination whatever one's chosen profession.

Today finds the energetic restaurant executive overseeing her stable of Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steakhouses as Vice-President of Lone Star Steakhouse & Saloon, Inc.

Early on, some may have asked: "Who would have thunk it?" But notoriety came soon as she was quickly recognized as a powerhouse in the good-ol'- boy society of the nation-wide steakhouse domain.

So, just how did the then 23-year-old brown-eyed gal from Gretna, Louisiana, an obscure blue-collar suburb near New Orleans, launch a career that would soon jettisoned her to a position as one of the top restaurant operators in the country?

For starters she learned the ropes of business, self-promotion and her own self-imposed work ethic early on. With a million ideas a minute and a bundle of energy, she was also blessed in the looks department. Not what one would expect from listening to her infamous radio spots. That matronly—countrified accent in the "call 490-9000" radio piece portrays a different visualization than the youthful brunette knock-out with the killer smile.

Somehow, she's also been able to keep her ego in check. Reminiscing, the down-to-earth self-made millionaire recalls from whence she came: "Being raised with humble beginnings in a middle class family with four brothers, I worked to buy my own clothes. If I wanted them, I worked at the local boutique," Ms. Lincoln recalls. Today, she could own the boutique.

Here's just a glimpse of her successful journey: With a pinch of desperation, an abundance of common sense, that hard work and a plethora of luck, particularly encountering valuable business relationships—when opportunity knocked, she answered the call.

And the Queen answered in spades.

The beginning: A small business owner of a specialty advertising company in the early 80's led her to the local

Del Frisco's in Gretna, where her spirited personality and savvy style were recognized by owner Dale Wamstad. Luck and opportunity came knocking.

After several years, and much convincing by Wamstad (and to make ends meet), Lincoln agreed to assist in the opening of Del Frisco's in New Orleans proper. She was the front of the house, with multiple tasks from taking reservations to cocktail hosting. Hard to believe that particular eatery opened without a bar.

A natural with the restaurant crowd, more hospitality responsibilities were soon hers for the taking.

Newly widowed and anxious to be independent, she had the moxie to strike out on her own in a business that would soon show off her star quality—and in the very competitive steakhouse arena, to boot.

Wamstad loved what he saw: "You may be able to clone a lot of things, but you ain't never going to duplicate a Dee Lincoln," he says. "She's one in a million. So why try?"

Mission accomplished in the Big Easy, her next successful career stop: Big D, Dallas, TX—1990. While Wamstad operated the original Lemmon Avenue location, Lincoln opened the newer Belt Line Road restaurant, which is now Chamberlain's Steak & Chop House.

Her meteoric star was rising and her restaurant's sales did not go unnoticed.

"She's one of the most talented front-of-house people I've ever worked with," comments a former head honcho of a competitive steakhouse empire. "Look at the operation, the results speak for themselves."

By 1992, the flagship mega-steakhouse on Spring Valley Road—one exit north of LBJ Freeway on the North Dallas Tollway—was under construction. Lincoln's successful Belt Line location and Wamstad's Lemmon Avenue spot were consolidated under one roof by 1993.

Two years later, Lone Star Steakhouse & Saloon, Inc. got wind of Del Frisco's "resounding success" and that year's sales: \$10 million plus.

Around the same time, the corporation also learned that yet another Del Frisco's was under construction in Cowtown, just 30 miles west of Dallas, in Fort Worth.



Sullivan's



Texas Land and Cattle

The dynamic duo made headlines that same year with the \$23 million dollar sale of their Dallas restaurant to the Lone Star Folks.

Some pretty heady times for the youthful Ms. Lincoln.

While Wamstad left his post at the restaurant, in her unprecedented style, Ms. Lincoln remains on premise at her 450-seat home away from home, her beef emporium in north Dallas. She supervises daily operations from sampling soups and sauces with executive chef Frank Rumore to overlooking all aspects of management with her "dream team."

Assistant Manager, Tommy Hall comments: "Don't be surprised if the next time you're eating at Del Frisco's she delivers your steak or helps clear off the table next to you. Dee is an operator."

By 1994 the steakhouse earned the recognition as the highest grossing restaurant in Texas. Open nightly, Ms. Lincoln and her "dream team" have consistently held a position in the top five ever since.

Their restaurant: Multiple dining rooms, marble fireplaces and masculine woods, delivering an elegant, sophisticated private club ambience with a cozy feel. Dinner guests often drift into the sultry living room setting of Havana Dee's piano bar and cocktail lounge for their ritual nightcap.

On the food front: The beef is wet-aged and hand-cut-to-order, USDA Prime. "Big bold Creole flavors and simplicity are our trademarks," claims Dee. "Ingredients, used for our cream spinach, potato au gratin and remoulade sauce, are basics you might find in your grandmother's pantry. We use pure butter, heavy cream and salt and pepper as our flavor enhancers."

The eatery's numerous awards include the Ivy Award (bestowed by peers), the Fine Dining Hall of Fame Award from Nation's Restaurant News and numerous Wine Spectator Awards. The restaurant has also been listed in Zagat Survey, as "the best steakhouse in Dallas."

As Vice-President of Operations for Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steakhouses, Lincoln credits business partner and her mentor, CEO Jamie Coulter, with his friendship and guidance along the way. "Jamie!" she exclaims. "An incredible man—his vision

and passion are unbelievable."

Home base may be the flagship north Dallas location, but miles continue to accumulate on her airline vouchers with regular visits to the headquarters in Wichita, Ks., as well as restaurants in Las Vegas, Denver, New York City and franchisee Orlando. The Fort Worth spot is always on her radar screen.

Adam Jones, Del Frisco's Fort Worth manager since opening day in 1996, comments: "Dee has been a great leader and role model with all the responsibilities of running a high-end steakhouse. Her best comment to me: 'no self-glorification. Put the food on the table and take great care of your guests'."

Rave reviews from the Rocky Mountain News came two years later with Del Frisco's 1997 arrival in the Denver area. Praise from their reviewer: "Del Frisco's delivers some of the finest aged steaks you'll ever taste and the wine list, especially the lineup of big reds, is a thing of beauty."

The following year, summer of '98, was the beginning of a two-year hiatus to the Big Apple for Ms. Lincoln as she supervised what was to become "the crown jewel" in the Lone Star upscale restaurant portfolio.

Opening date, New York City: March 2000.

The reconstructed former bank space at the corner of 49th Street and 6th Avenue "screams money." As well it should with a \$10 million-plus price tag and "twenty-eight foot high windows on three sides showcasing a priceless view that encompasses Rockefeller Plaza, Radio City Music Hall and the Fox News studio."

An extensive art collection and masculine furnishings dominate the three floors of close to 500 seats. The menu lists entrées at under \$50 and a wine list comparable to any cellar catering to the ultra-chic Manhattan restaurant crowd.

A promotional evening of "Texas' way of entertaining" was recently hosted by Ms. Lincoln and Dallas Mayor Laura Miller at the "culinary temple" where a slew of top magazine editors, convention bureau folks and travel agents got a dual taste of Big D and Big Apple hospitality.

Within four months (July 2000), Coulter and Lincoln opened their Las Vegas restaurant in Sin City's customary splashy, rock and roll style.



Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steakhouse

They came bearing a special gift and found the ideal glitzy place of honor for their "Q Table," one of their highest-bid items from the Napa Valley Wine Auction (\$360,000 in '97). The extravagant James Bond-inspired-motorized, big boy toy rotates 19 bottles of reserve wines while playing Bond tunes. Each is "etched and patterned after a Bond film."

That same year—2000—proved more fruitful and rewarding for Ms. Lincoln than any of her business successes. The Gotham city restaurant's opening became secondary for her and husband, insurance exec John DiNardo, when they welcomed their daughter, Bella, in December.

"Family is the most important part of my life," she says. "I am blessed. I thank God everyday for my wonderful husband, John, and my beautiful daughter, Bella. I want to keep balance in my life and to be the best mom while continuing this incredible journey."

Continuing that journey, Lincoln's bigger-than-life life style also finds her participating in charitable venues all over the country. Whether it's buying prize steers in Denver or Fort Worth at \$75,000 to \$132,500 a head, or consistently being the top bidder of the Napa Valley Wine Auction, Lone Star's participation continually contributes to the area's charitable causes. (Considered the top charity auction in the country, Lincoln has consistently been one of the auction's top bidders for the past several years.)

Auction proceeds of \$6.5 million were "funneled" into Valley charities in 2003, while youngsters who raise the prize steers at the stock shows find

themselves rewarded with a nice hit to their college funds and monies to cover their expenses.

A pet project of Ms. Lincoln, Dallas' 9th Annual Del Frisco's Golf Classic benefiting the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, raised funds that surpassed the \$2 million mark this spring. Lincoln is also proud of her 1999 Volunteer of the Year recognition.

Affectionately, known as "boss" by her "dream team," Lincoln has the ability to charm the birds right off the trees, as they will attest: "Dee makes an impact by just showing up at the restaurant," says assistant manager Hall. "There's always a buzz about her. She is a boss everyone dreams of having. She is a teacher of her art."

Commenting further, well-known General Manager Brian Perry says: "Dee Lincoln being born on the 4th of July explains why she has such an energetic, charismatic personality. She ignites excitement in all she does. She has a passion in all she does. She has a passion in people and in the relationships she has built over the years."

How true it must be. When she walks in the door at 5251 Spring Valley Road with that down-to-earth personality dripping with friendliness and warmth, the energy kicks up a notch. Her "dream team" knows, the Queen, with a million ideas a minute is in the house.

So...was Dee Lincoln destined to live the life she leads today?

It's been said that success is the convergence hard work and opportunity. Even after all her success, Dee Lincoln continues to validate that definition.



Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steakhouse

