

lighthouse picnics | jill curran

Along the edge of the rugged coastline of Ferryland sits a small, old, red and white lighthouse. Still standing after more than 140 years, the lighthouse is an important landmark for the community of Ferryland. The tower light has been used for many years as a beacon for passing ships, however the function of the lighthouse dwelling has certainly changed. Nowadays, thousands of people flock here every summer for gourmet picnics and beautiful scenery. It is safe to say that Lighthouse Picnics in Ferryland is one of Newfoundland and Labrador's major tourist attractions.

Like many unique businesses, it all started with a far-fetched idea – serving gourmet picnics at the lighthouse in Ferryland. Jill Curran was living in Scotland when the idea for Lighthouse Picnics came to her. She discussed with her friend Sonia O'Keefe who was living in the United States at the time. Together, the women have mixed educational backgrounds of Public Relations and Culinary Arts, so starting a business that involved tourism and cooking seemed natural to them. While many others had doubts, you cannot underestimate the power of a really interesting and unique business idea. While O'Keefe left the business several years ago, the business continues to grow bigger and better each year – it is now entering its 10th season. For Curran, there is a very close tie to the Ferryland lighthouse and her love of the old building started at a very young age. Her grandmother was born at the lighthouse and her great grandfather was once the lighthouse keeper. After the lighthouse tower was automated in 1970, the building was left vacant and over the years was vandalized and fell into ruins. "Sadly, a lot of my memories of the building are of it falling down, it was always in bad shape," recalls Curran. "For many years I wondered what I could do to help restore the lighthouse and breathe new life into the damaged old building." In 2003, she got that chance with Lighthouse Picnics. Lighthouse Picnics offers customers a one of a kind dining experience as they enjoy a gourmet homemade picnic while taking in the spectacular view of the ocean off the coast of Ferryland. A short walk is all it takes to reach the building, which sits along the edge of the coastline at Ferryland head – one of the most eastern points in all of North America. Once there, you can choose a delicious lunch off the menu, pick a coloured flag, and then find the perfect spot outside on the grass to enjoy your meal. The wicker basket containing your picnic is delivered right to your resting spot.

Operating from late May to late September, the business is one of the top tourist attractions in the area and serves between 100-150 people on average on a 'sunny' day. People come from all over the world to enjoy this unique meal and the lighthouse is a very busy place. This was not the case when the business first opened.

When Lighthouse Picnics first started in 2003, the lighthouse dwelling was not renovated, resulting in all business activity taking place outside. All meals were cooked in the town of Ferryland, they had to drive the food to the lighthouse and serve people from what Curran describes as "a lemonade stand." While some thought the idea was a bit unusual, word of mouth quickly spread about these young ladies at the lighthouse in Ferryland. While some may have initially come for a picnic out of curiosity or came upon the lighthouse by chance, they kept coming back for the delicious food and amazing scenery.

After the first year it was clear they were on to something special and would have to renovate the lighthouse to keep growing the business. "Initially we weren't sure if the idea would take off. We were doing something very different, no one had ever seen something like Lighthouse

Picnics before," says Curran. "We were very excited that people understood what we were trying to achieve and supported us."

Curran, now the sole owner of Lighthouse Picnics, says that business couldn't be better. Over the years the business has grown tremendously and gained popularity, so much so, that a reservation system had to be put in place. With eleven employees working during peak season, the goal is to provide every customer with a memorable, quality experience. Ensuring this means that all food items are prepared fresh at the lighthouse each day. Every lemon is squeezed by hand, and all bread and desserts are baked in the lighthouse kitchen. Because of this, there is a limit to what can be produced each day. Reservations allow for maximum efficiency, however, if there is room, walk-ins will not be turned away.

Owning your own business can provide a number of challenges, but after nine years in business Curran has learned how to handle anything that is thrown her way. "One of the biggest challenges has been trying to explain to people the concept of what we do," says Curran. "It's truly one of those things that is hard to put into words, you have to come experience it yourself to really understand what we are trying to accomplish."

Curran is a Public Relation's graduate from Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax and also has a History degree from Memorial University. She feels that her educational background has helped her with regards to Lighthouse Picnics. Being able to communicate to people what she does is crucial when promoting her business.

Another challenge faced by Lighthouse Picnics is the logistics of the business. All supplies have to be transported to the lighthouse by the employees. Operating at a remote location can cause difficulties with regards to supply shipment. However, Curran believes that challenge is also to her advantage. "That is what draws people here, the remote area where you can really get away from it all," she says. "You can lie by the ocean, watch whales and enjoy a delicious picnic – it is something you can't get anywhere else, and that's what makes it such a special experience for people."

Offering such a unique product has brought people from all over the world to Lighthouse Picnics. "We really should have a map up of where people have come from, we meet so many people from all over," says Curran. Guests include visitors from Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Croatia and Australia, just to name a few. However, Curran notes that a huge portion of Lighthouse Picnics business is repeat business from locals. "The backbone of our business is definitely Newfoundlanders," she says. "I think it's a testament to all our hard work when people who live here want to come year after year, it makes us all very proud of what we're doing at the lighthouse."

While minimal advertising is done on Curran's part, Lighthouse Picnics have won various awards and have been featured in many articles on both the nationally and internationally. In 2005 they received the Cultural Tourism Award presented by Hospitality Newfoundland and Labrador. This award promotes the innovative pursuit of cultural expression within the tourism industry. "It was nice that the award gave a lot of credibility to us, because at that time people were still just finding out who we were," says Curran.

In 2007, Lighthouse Picnics won the Restaurateur of the Year Award presented by the Newfoundland and Labrador Restaurant and Foodservices Association and Hospitality

Newfoundland and Labrador. Along with these awards, the business has been featured in various articles and magazines. Such magazines have been Chatelaine, Air Canada's EnRoute magazine, Canadian Living magazine and many others.

With so much attention and publicity given to Lighthouse Picnics, Curran is always being asked what her plans for the future are. She has been approached by people in a number of Newfoundland and Labrador communities wondering if she would ever bring her business to other lighthouses. While Curran has thought about this, her main focus is the lighthouse in Ferryland.

"Each year you have to keep it fresh, offer new products, but still keep the consistency and quality that Lighthouse Picnics is known for," says Curran.

In 2010 Curran purchased Maxxim Vacations, a company which sells Newfoundland and Labrador vacations and admits that she would never have been able to it without the experience she has gained through Lighthouse Picnics. While it is a very different type of business from Lighthouse Picnics, the concept of sharing what is magical about Newfoundland and Labrador is at the heart of both businesses.