Written by Mark Jaeger
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COMPLETING WORK ON the mural at the entry to the Firehouse Restaurant in Saukville was John L. Staton of Wisconsin Sign Builders. The new restaurant originally housed the Saukville Fire Department and later several other restaurants. *Photos by Mark Jaeger*

Tribute to firefighters is striking centerpiece of Saukville dining spot

Restaurant owner Jim Keller predicts that stepping through the front door of the Fire House Restaurant in Saukville will be an inspiring moment for many first-time customers.

Keller knows the feeling. He was just as moved when he saw the colorful mural titled “Salute to the American firefighter” inside the door for the first time Monday.

The 11-by-14-foot mural was created by a Saukville company, Wisconsin Sign Builders.

“People are going to be blown away. It is so cool,” Keller said.

The mural includes the words to the Firefighter's Prayer, an image of a bowed firefighter in full gear and historic photographs of fire trucks and other equipment collected from Saukville, Chicago and New York. A scene from Ground Zero of the 9/11 attacks is the most poignant entry in the collage.

Firefighting equipment and memorabilia from fire departments all over the area will also be on display throughout the restaurant.

"We share a lot of the same values as these guys, an appreciation of community and giving back," Keller said.

The restaurant gained its thematic inspiration from the history of the brick building, which was erected in the 1960s to house the Saukville Fire Department and village offices.

After a new Village Hall was built and the fire department moved to modern facilities on the west side of town, the building at 100 S. Main St. was used by several restaurants.

The most recent of those businesses, Patrice's, closed more than a year ago.

Just as the building's history provided the inspiration for the restaurant's name, the "for sale" sign that stood outside the building for a protracted period of time inspired Keller.

A Town of Saukville resident who works internationally in the printing trade, Keller said he has always loved cooking and felt drawn toward getting into the restaurant business.

He hopes to cut back on his printing career and devote much of his time to running the restaurant.

"I would drive past the building every day and think, 'What a great place for a restaurant,'" Keller said.

He started to put the pieces together when he thought of a Tuesday night bowling buddy, Daryl Frey.

Frey has an extensive background in the restaurant business.

"I knew Daryl has wanted his own place for the longest time. I told him he had to at least look at the location. It took about 10 months of nudging, but he finally agreed to run the kitchen," Keller said.

Frey said, "I began in the restaurant business when I was 15 and have been working in it for 25 years. I started out doing the dishes, then as a prep cook, then a cook and finally as general manager of Benders in West
Bend."

Frey is excited about starting the restaurant, but intends to spend all of his time in the kitchen.

“You won’t be seeing much of me,” he promised.

Frey will have a lot of input on the menu, however, which he said will feature selections for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

“If you had to pick a specialty, I think it will be our wings and sauce. They are going to be big, and I came up with a lot of the special sauces, like Blazin’ garlic, Wild Turkey, peanut and Habanera,” he said.

In addition to daily specials, the restaurant will feature time-tested Wisconsin favorites, like Friday fish fries of walleye, cod, perch and bluegill, and Saturday night prime rib dinners.

A variety of pizzas and sandwiches will also be served.

“One thing I know is that people around here want quality food and they don’t want to pay high-end prices,” Frey said.

Finalizing the details of the restaurant has taken the business partners almost a year, but they anticipate starting to serve food next week.

The weak economy has provided the team with its pick of some top-notch employees.

“Attitude is important to us, and I think we have been able to hire some great employees who really want to work here,” Keller said.

The phone number is 284-8886.