Beanie's restaurant thrives in Port through 20 years of challenges

People warned Marcia Endicott and Joanie Nigrelli that the best way to ruin their friendship was to become business partners.

That was 20 years ago, when Beanie's Mexican Restaurant & Cantina, 102 E. Grand Ave., was a somewhat spontaneous notion.

Today, that enduring friendship has provided the cement for one of Port Washington's most popular dining spots.

The restaurant started as Beanie's Subs 'n Stuff, a sandwich shop where Endicott's daughter worked.

When the business was offered for sale, Endicott saw an opportunity for the longtime friends to work together.

"I called Joanie on the phone and said, 'We're going to buy a restaurant.' Her immediate response was, 'Do you have any idea how much work that is going to be?'" Endicott said.

"And Marcia's answer was, 'We're women, we know how to work hard,'" Nigrelli added.

The Beanie's name stayed but Mexican fare became the food of choice, largely because Endicott enjoys traveling to Mexico with her family and sampling local fare.

"In that respect, we are opposites because I don't really like to travel. Marcia is part gypsy. She always has a packed bag," Nigrelli said.

Selections from South of the Border dominate the menu, such as crab quesadillas for

appetizers, sizzling chicken chili or entree favorites like “belly buster” burritos or grilled mahi mahi smothered in Veracruz sauce.

A kids’ menu — “para los chicos” — includes toned-down versions of tacos and enchiladas along with the usual burgers, hot dogs or chicken tenders.

Family dining is a big part of the success of the restaurant.

“People really seem to feel at home here and I know there are many times we’ve made a difference in people’s lives. We’ll have customers come in who want to talk about their problems, and I think that is one of the reasons we are here,” Endicott said.

Both women share a strong faith and sense of purpose.

“I think Beanie’s is His reflection in our lives,” Nigrelli said.

Endicott agreed, saying, “I really believe this is what we were meant to do.”

That is not to say everything is always in perfect harmony.

“We sometimes yell at each other, but it is more like sisters fighting. This business has never taken its toll on our friendship,” Endicott said.

Beanie’s underwent a significant transformation seven years ago, when the tiny restaurant expanded into an adjacent turn-of-the-century bar at the corner of Grand Avenue and Wisconsin Street.

During that demolition, construction crews learned that a retaining wall on the north side of the tavern had been leaking for decades, causing severe erosion to that side of the building. The basement, which had been used for decades as a beer cooler, was also rotting and had to be filled.

The complications set the construction project back, but the owners were intent on reopening within 100 days.

“We never got a chance to hold a grand opening because people were lined up at the door for three weeks as soon as we reopened,” Endicott said.

The latest change has been more subtle, with Sendik’s Food Markets now selling the restaurant’s signature sauces.

Eventually, Endicott said she would also like to see the outdoor dining area expanded and made more permanent, perhaps with screened seating.

Although both women are now very involved grandmothers, they don’t see an end to their roles at Beanie’s.

“I think we’ll keep working here as long as our bodies hold out,” Endicott said.

BAR-SIDE SWINGS ARE just some of the playful amenities at Beanie’s Restaurant & Cantina in Port Washington. Co-owners Joanie Nigrelli (left) and Marcia Endicott have maintained a strong friendship during their 20 years in business.