Written by Mark Jaegar
Wednesday, 11 November 2009 17:48

Food, scenic lakefront share spotlight at popular Port Washington restaurant

Many of the finest restaurants in the world pay painstaking attention to color schemes and harmonizing decor.

For John Weinrich, who has owned Port Washington's NewPort Shore restaurant for the past 20 years, Mother Nature provides the most breathtaking decoration.

The affable restaurant owner said he never gets tired of coming to work and admiring the natural beauty of the lakefront.

"We have a view of water to the east, north and south. No matter how many times you sit here, every time you look out the window you see something new. I love watching the crashing waves and the lighthouse," Weinrich said.

The lure of Lake Michigan may draw customers from near and far to the restaurant, but he said the food and cordial staff keep people coming back.

"During the boating season, it is like being right next to a small town, with lots of out-of-town people coming in. But it is the in-town customers who keep us in business throughout the year," Weinrich said.

While many Port businesses lament the ebb and flow of the tourist trade, he said a simple formula has brought success to the restaurant.

"It takes lots of hard work, great food, reasonable prices, and the view doesn't hurt," Weinrich said.

“I always try to anticipate what the customers will want. That means offering a perch sandwich as well as a South African lobster tail.”

Given its lakefront location, seafood is always a popular draw.

“Deep fried lake perch is far and away our No. 1 seller, and a lot of tourists like to order the whitefish because it is fresh from Lake Michigan,” Weinrich said.

But, with the diverse tastes of customers in mind, Weinrich said the restaurant has also developed a reputation for its steaks, ribs and specialty Shore Burgers.

Port Washington’s dining tradition also gets a nod on the menu, courtesy of three recipes passed along by Lloyd Smith, whose family once ran the landmark Smith Bros. Fish Shanty Restaurant.

“Lloyd has been great to us. He shared their recipe for lemon meringue pie, broiled whitefish and bouillabaisse. I thought it was important to offer them as our tribute to all that Smith Bros. meant to Port Washington,” Weinrich said.

Meals are also served on dishes once used at Smith Bros. Weinrich acquired them at an auction when the restaurant closed.

As a young man Weinrich worked at the iconic restaurant, as well as the Riverview Inn in Saukville and Port Hotel, another traditional Port dining favorite.

He was working full-time at Taylor Electric after college when the possibility of becoming a restaurant owner surfaced.

“My uncle (Richard Lehn) asked me, ‘Do you want to buy a restaurant?’ I was young and foolish, so I said, ‘Yes,’” Weinrich said.

That was how the former Lakeview Lounge became family property.

However, the restaurant at 407 E. Jackson St. was a far cry from what it is today.

Originally, the much smaller business was a combination restaurant and bait shop.

Since that time, there have been several major expansions and the dining spot continues to undergo improvements. The kitchen was recently revamped and the bathrooms are being updated.

The dominant feature inside the restaurant continues to be the 97-foot-long bar surrounded by

dining tables.

“We should have kept a running tally of all the people who sat at this bar over the years,” joked Weinrich.

Two recent changes at the restaurant have proven very popular with customers.

The business was converted to a smoke-free setting two years ago, followed by the addition of a patio area that has become the focal point for summer activities. The most eye-catching feature of that outdoor dining area is a salvaged Great Lakes tug boat.

Through all the changes, Weinrich said, the fact that running a restaurant is hard work remains a constant.

“Twenty years ago, I thought I would be driving around in a Rolls Royce by now. That hasn’t happened. I didn’t get paid the first couple of years I owned the restaurant. If you are in it for the money, you would be better off just putting your money in the bank nobody throws money at you in this business,” Weinrich said.

“If you want to succeed, you have to expect to put in long hours. Look around at any of the successful restaurants or bars in town, and you will find owners who are willing to put in the hours.”

Weinrich said he gets a lot of help from his family, including wife Angela, stepdaughter Keri and sister Mindy.

His late mother Lilian developed a devoted following for her homemade pies, and his father Jack has contributed greatly to the nautical theme of the restaurant by creating an ever-growing fleet of model boats on display.

Weinrich said he often lets his own dining experiences guide moves made at the Port business.

“When I go out, I’m not looking for a franchise restaurant. I love family restaurants. If the waitress says the wait is 1-1/2 hours, I know that is a place I want to be,” he said. “I spend that time enjoying a drink while studying the menu.”

Location remains an unparalleled attraction for the restaurant, a fact that is not lost on would-be developers.

“I get offers for this property all the time, but who knows how serious they are. Besides, I have two kids I have to put through college,” Weinrich said.

NewPort Shores owner john Weinrich (left) took time out to enjoy a perch platter, served by cook Richard Plier. Photo by Mark Jaeger