

Twisted Willow enjoys a warm welcome

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Franklin St. restaurant brings upscale dining to Port's downtown

The opening of few Port Washington businesses has been as greatly anticipated as the Twisted Willow restaurant, 308 N. Franklin St.

The evidence was in the number of people who routinely stopped to peer in the darkened windows of the restaurant to get a glimpse at what was inside.

Now open, the upscale restaurant fills a very visible void created when Wind Rose Wine and Martini Bar closed about four years ago and the building went into foreclosure.

More than a century old, the distinctive cream brick building is the former Wisconsin House Hotel.



After languishing in the heart of the city's downtown for years, the building found new life when it was targeted by a group of physicians and longtime friends who comprise McBunsen 2 LLC.

The ownership team includes Doug and Vickie McManus, Richard and Jill Bunting, and Ken and Chris Jensen.

The partners also own Ellen's Home, an assisted-living facility in Port Washington.

The restaurant is closely affiliated with the Town of Grafton farm of the same name that will be the source of much of the locally grown produce on the menu.

Restaurant manager Jill Bunting said she has been stunned by the reception the business has received in its first few weeks of operation.

"We were aiming at kind of a soft launch, hoping to build up our Port Washington customer base initially. But even relying on just word of mouth, the response has been overwhelming," Bunting said.

"We have been very busy on Fridays for our fish fry, and Saturdays which are traditionally date night. We have been turning over our seating about three times a night."

There is seating for 60, with another 10 seats available at the bar.

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She said the partnership originally looked to open a bed-and-breakfast, but fell in love with the Franklin Street building's potential as a restaurant.

"We just love the building and all of its windows," Bunting said.

New screen doors have been added to two doors to take advantage of the off-the-lake breezes that can cool Port Washington in the swelter of summer.

Bunting said the owners are committed to promoting sustainable lifestyles, as evidenced by the use of recycled materials in the building.

"We became very good customers at the West Bend ReStore, Goodwill and St. Vincent stores. The building used to be a hardware store at one time, and we found some old lamps in the basement that we also managed to clean up and repurpose in the restaurant," she said.

"There are also a couple of old safes in the basement that we could use, but I haven't been able to find the manpower to move them upstairs."

The head chef is Bunting's brother, Dan Wiken, also a co-owner, who previously was head chef at the Packing House in Milwaukee.

Wiken is joined in the kitchen by chef Nicholas Keller, a Port Washington native.

Although not extensive, Bunting said the menu was designed to cater to a wide range of diners.

A selection of appetizers and sandwiches are available for lighter dining, including baked fondue, crab cakes and coconut curry with grilled shrimp. Prices range from about \$5 to \$13.

Featured entrees, again, offer a little bit of everything, including some unusual fare. Choices include Asian barbecued salmon, wild mushroom and kale stroganoff, dry rubbed short ribs and "Big Kid" macaroni and cheese. Prices range from \$10 to \$23.

A children's menu offers a selection of \$5 kid-preferred entrees, and includes dirt-and-worm pudding for dessert.

The wine list is limited to 12 carefully selected offerings by the bottle or glass, supplemented by a variety of unusual tap beers, microbrews and imported beers.

The menu includes pairing suggestions of both beer and wine.

The restaurant is open at 4:30 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. The bar opens daily from 3 to 6 p.m.

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