

Mariner's Inn remains Madison steak stalwart

By Aaron R. Conklin
Special to The Gazette

MADISON

You can't really say you've rocked a summer in Madison unless you manage to eat a meal overlooking one of the city's several lakes. There's just something so uniquely zen about enjoying a fine meal while looking out on the sun sparkling over the waters of Lake Mendota. And there's something comforting about doing it at a place with deep local roots and a knack for searing a fine piece of steak. The Mariner's Inn remains the high-end tent pole of the Von Rutenberg family restaurant empire, which continues to thrive into its sixth decade in Madison. Three of that tent's four posts (Mariner's, the more mainstream friendly Nau-Ti-Gal and the Betty Lou Cruise experience) are still going strong. The fourth, the Middleton mid-range steak and seafood joint Captain Bill's, was sadly drowned by the pandemic. Mariner's Inn, um, stakes its reputation on its steaks, and that rep is well-earned. Much like the Brewers' playoff hopes, the price of beef has soared over the summer (it's a supply-chain thing). Compared to some other local steakhouses, Mariner's prices are less likely to induce sticker shock, offering a wider variety of smaller cuts that appeal to a range of appetites. To wit, the priciest cut on the menu, a bone-in rib eye, will set you back \$50, but other cuts (think sirloins and tenderloins)



Aaron R. Conklin photo

The steak and seafood offerings at Mariner's Inn in Madison have gained raves since the restaurant opened back in 1966. Gazette restaurant reviewer Aaron R. Conklin notes that, aside from some service issues, the grand praise is well-deserved.

hover in the \$20-\$30 range. The steaks also come as part of a complete meal as opposed to a la carte, and they are served in a wide range of ways—with Cajun seasoning, with a tangy whiskey peppercorn sauce, and more. While the formal supper-club ambiance and breezy patio are welcoming for those who choose to dine in, service is currently a little bit of an issue. Like a lot of restaurants, Mariner's has struggled during the latest COVID-19 surge to attract and retain staff at a time of year where customer traffic happens to be peaking again. Calling in a curbside order—which we could have done dockside if we had chosen to arrive by boat—was a significantly terser experience than it needed to be, and

although the order was prepared perfectly and on time, that initial brusqueness got the meal off to a rocky start. There's a menu special every single night at Mariner's featuring everything from stuffed shrimp to a traditional Friday fish fry with Canadian walleye and haddock. Targeting Sunday, which is surf and turf night, was a great choice. For \$45, your plate comes packed with a thick and tender lobster tail—a delicacy that is actually fairly hard to find during the pandemic, thanks yet again to disrupted supply chains—and an 8-ounce top sirloin steak that was expertly seared on the outside and pleasantly pink and tender within. Mariner's must have a special line on lobsters, as they have been

hosting \$69 lobster boils on the last Thursday of the month all summer, with two more to go in September and October. You'll need to call ahead for reservations. The menu labels the hash browns, usually a reliable go-to at any solid steak joint, as "legendary," but I'm throwing a flag on that designation. The lump of onion-heavy seasoned potatoes served here is barely ordinary, let alone legendary. Punt the familiar potato options and go hard with the clam chowder instead. Creamy, thick and packed with chunks of clam and mushroom, this soup is so flavorful it might have you considering making it the centerpiece of your meal. If you're more of a salad person, make sure you top yours with Mariner's blue

Mariner's Inn

Address: 5339 Light-house Bay Drive, Madison.
Website: marinersmadison.com
Phone: 608-246-3120
Current hours: 4:30-9 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday and Sunday; 4:30-10 p.m. Friday-Saturday.
Reservations: Yes
Credit cards: Accepted
Wheelchair access: Yes
Vegetarian items: Yes
Menu: You can feel (and taste) the expertise of nearly six decades of steak-craft when you order a cut at Mariners, but the menu is arranged to be accessible to a wide range of taste interests and, thankfully, budgets. Carnivores and seafood lovers alike will appreciate the combo plates that let you sample from all the coves of the Mariner palette, pairing 6-ounce tenderloins with

jumbo shrimp or lobster tail (\$47.99-\$54.99, depending on your choice) or opting for top sirloin as a mainstay instead. Vegetarians also needn't feel left out: A pasta entrée (\$19.99) tops RP Pasta's thick fettuccine noodles with seasonal veggies in a light sauce.

Ratings

Food:

Service:

Cost: \$18.99-\$54.99

Value:

5 plates—Outstanding
4 plates—Above average
3 plates—Average
2 plates—Below average
1 plate—Poor

cheese dressing, which shares a smooth chunkiness with the chowder. Interestingly, some of the non-beef and fried seafood options on the menu are clever dark horses worth trying. A pair of entrees create some magic through layering and stuffing. The Chicken Betty Lou (\$23.99), named for the restaurant's founding matriarch, stuffs a tender and sizable breast of chicken with not one, not two, but three types of mushrooms, perches the breast on a bed of tomato, spinach and basil bruschetta and drenches the entire affair with a Chardonnay-based sauce. What sounds like a street fight of flavor works remarkably well together, with subtle and sharp flavors elevating the bird to a higher level. If salmon is more your thing, a salmon Florentine (\$29.99) spins the same multi-layered formula, stuffing the fish with vegetables and then broiling it and covering it with a white-wine dill sauce. Wrapping up the meal with a piece of key lime pie that tasted much better than it looked (the crust was a bit soggy) capped a great late summer meal.

Aaron R. Conklin is a freelance writer based in Madison. He has written about food, theater and pop culture for publications such as Isthmus, the Wisconsin State Journal and Madison Magazine.

Huml/Play originally intended as movie

Continued from 1C

Lyke added. "When you're on stage, you're basically working with theater of the mind, and there is only so much you can do with props and staging. With film, if I want a scene to take place in a park, we take cameras to the park. For a scene at a school, we go to a school." But when JPAC approached Lyke about another stage play wrapping another of his original works, "Mirror Image," Lyke saw an opportunity. He approached Huml with an idea. "I said I wanted to write this as a play so, within a year, the story

would be out, and we wouldn't have to twiddle our thumbs with film," Lyke recalled. "He said, 'Absolutely.'" As it turns out, the decision was a blessing. Not only did Huml get to see his story performed, he was granted the satisfaction of seeing it reprised in 2017 and presented to sold-out houses. Now, as "Postnuptial" prepares for its third run with a one-weekend engagement Sept. 9-12 at JPAC, Lyke has given the script a facelift with a potential celluloid future in mind. "It's a pretty substantial rewrite, and I'm really happy with how it came

out," he said. "I'm happy with the script, and I think it's going to work really well. It's like when you make 'Spiderman,' and then the origin story is different." Updated as a film script, "Postnuptial" now boasts enough changes that Lyke suggests those who saw the show previously consider coming out again for a second look. "I had three dozen drafts of this on my hard drive," he said. "When I got the opportunity to



Lyke

re-present it at JPAC, I had all of these new ideas and scenes and things. I decided it was an opportunity to, instead of doing the same things, go at it from another perspective, so it has a lot of new dialogue. I also massaged some of the characters and relationships and added some scenes that were not in the first one." Burkart, who wasn't at JPAC when the play was originally staged, said he doesn't want to make a carbon copy of what was done before. Instead, he wants the show's focus to be on Huml's memory. "It falls on me as director to make sure his memory is still there," Burkart

IF YOU GO

What: Janesville Performing Arts Center production of Jim Lyke's "Postnuptial Agreement," based on a story by Tony Huml.
When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, Sept. 9-11, and 2 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 12.
Where: JPAC, 408 S. Main St., Janesville.
Cost: \$15 for adults, \$10 for students. Tickets are available online at JanesvillePAC.org.
Also: Talk-back events after each show will feature representatives from the Rock County Cancer Coalition and partners from local hospice services.
For more: Call the JPAC box office at 608-758-0297 or email nathan@janesvillepac.org.

said. "It's not the same as him being there physically, but what we've talked about are other ways we can make sure his memory lives on with this. This is much bigger than the person directing or the people performing. This is about what this person did over the last few years of his life, and he deserves

to be part of that." Lyke stands in agreement, and though he has compiled a script-writing resume filled with titles loved by local audiences, he said working with Huml on "Postnuptial" was a career benchmark. "This one has certainly driven me more than any other play," he said. "Usually they are written and performed, and I move on. This one, I can't let it go because I keep looking for ways to make it the best it can be. Every draft, every change, every new thought ... I ran everything by him. I wanted his blessing on everything we did, and I wanted him to be happy with it. That was the main objective. "I won't be satisfied until I see this thing on screen and I can say, 'Tony, we did it.'"

CAST AND CREW

Cast: Jon Churchwell, Amber Fornstedt, Greta Schuler, Bernice Hein, Micaela Van Kirk, Matt Johnson, Julie Marquardt, Shelton Tripp.
Production coordinator: Linda Harned.
Director: Nathan Burkart.
Assistant director: Candace Griffin.
Technical director: Mike Stalsberg.

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