

Local Flavor: The Waterfront

The fish are fresh and the pizza is homemade at this restaurant on the shores of Browns Lake

By Roger Anderson
Journal Times

Monday, July 28, 2008 2:12 PM CDT

WHAT: The Waterfront

WHERE: 31100 Weiler Road, Burlington

PHONE: (262) 763-9989

WEB SITE: <http://www.waterfrontbrownslake.com/>

HOURS: 4 to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday; Closed Mondays. Hours for the beach bar are 4 p.m. to close Fridays and noon to close on Saturdays

and

Sundays from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

DIRECTIONS: From the intersection of Highways 31 and 20 in Racine, head west on Washington Avenue for 6.2 miles; Make a slight left onto Spring Street (County Highway C) and continue for 7.7 miles; turn right onto Durand Avenue (Highway 11) and continue 8.2 miles; As you see the lake on your right, prepare to turn on Spur Drive; Make left onto Weiler Road and The Waterfront is on your left.

BURLINGTON — By boot, by bike, by boat or by Buick; it doesn't matter if you drive, swim, ride or walk to The Waterfront in Burlington, so long as you bring your appetite.

Resting along the shores of Browns Lake, as the only restaurant with water and road access, according to owner Dan Murphy, The Waterfront provides the relaxation of pizza with friends and the romance of dinner for two.

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With five picturesque bay windows looking north over Racine County's fourth biggest lake, the main, street-level dining area features a host of four-top tables and wooden chairs.

back

With a nightly capacity of nearly 90, The Waterfront also features a full circle bar upstairs, full bar downstairs, banquet and dining area downstairs and porch lakeside outdoor seating area.

“I love the water ... one of the reasons I bought it is because I want it to stay as a restaurant,” Murphy said. “I want to have this place for the people.”

‘It all started with a parade’

Above the northern entranceway that leads from The Waterfront bar into the dining area sits a carved wooden sign that reads “It all started with a parade.” It could just as easily say it all started with chocolate, as in, Burlington’s very own ChocolateFest. For Murphy, who has owned The Waterfront for just more than a year, the sign represents much more than his decision to buy the lakefront property.

It was 20 years ago. Dan was living in Chicago. Barbara was living in Milwaukee. Both worked for the same Fortune 500 Company. Both knew Karen Shainke, who lived in the Burlington area.

“She said ‘why don’t you get a house on the lake?’ ” Murphy said as he explained how after three years of dating, Shainke thought maybe Browns Lake would be a nice place for the couple to settle down. “I said, ‘Karen, I’ll tell you what. If you can find me a house on the lake, I’ll buy it and I’ll marry her.’ Two weeks later I bought my house on the lake, two months later we got married. So it all started with a parade. So when I bought the place she had the sign made.”

Barbara Murphy still works for the Fortune 500 company that Dan retired from after 32 years. She helps at the restaurant with the payroll and odds and ends. Their daughter, Katherine, 17, is typically the hostess on Friday evenings. Shainke is her godmother.

Before Murphy decided to buy The Waterfront in June 2007, he worked as manager of the restaurant for more than a half dozen years.

New ownership

“We carried a lot of things over, but we have new menus,” Murphy said. Also new are the front doors, heating and cooling systems, running water in the basement and recently resurfaced parking lot.

Amid a wall of fish and fishing pictures hang three flat-screen televisions in the main bar.

“That was one of the first things I did when I bought this place,” Murphy said. With all the big games on and a buffet for customers during Packers season, the TVs have been a nice boost for business.

Since the 1930s, The Waterfront building has been a restaurant; before then it is believed to have started off as a lakefront home.

For Murphy, the toughest part about owning a business just five minutes from home is that it becomes hard to make excuses not to go to work. The long hours are continued by deliveries, general maintenance and a desire to have his hand in day-to-day transactions and interactions with customers.

Murphy knows the long days are just a part of the business, what’s been unexpected is the steep decline in America’s economy. But he prefers to shine a positive light on the current situation.

People wonder how a business can be doing well with the economy and gas prices the way they are, he said. “But more people are staying local.”

People are putting their boat behind their car and going down the road instead of across the state.

Prime rib and premier entertainer

Nearly every Saturday night, The Waterfront puts a little rhythm in its rustic décor. It even features a bit of Las Vegas flair on occasion. Performed once a month, Murphy calls the Vegas Show a bit of “dinner and dancing.”

“It’s professional karaoke, he said. “These people were all professional singers in Vegas and they put on a different act every month.”

The show does not cost anything, but reservations can fill up quickly. A 6 p.m. dinner slot reserves your table for the whole evening.

Fresh fish, never-frozen pizzas

Although the menu consists of just two pages of choices, the variety of those decisions ranges from six different sandwiches to six different, extremely fresh Friday fish options.

The fresh fish is something on which Murphy prides himself. Through a deal with the St. Paul Fish Co., located in Milwaukee's Public Market, The Waterfront will order fish on Thursday that is flown into the market Friday and delivered fresh to The Waterfront by 3 p.m.

Friday specials feature Icelandic cod and Great Lake perch, to go with salmon, tilapia, walleye and tuna sandwiches on the everyday menu.

It's hard to imagine walking into The Waterfront without seeing at least one pizza being eaten. At times it seems as though the tables come adorned with pizza centerpieces. At \$7.95 for a small, \$8.95 for a medium and \$9.95 for a large, the pizzas feature all homemade ingredients and 16 topping options (\$1-\$1.50 per topping).

"Pizzas are one of our specialties. It's all homemade. Thin crust," Murphy said.

Some bites, the crust seems so thin you wonder why your hands aren't covered in sauce when you're finished.

The people

On a hot summer day, Murphy knows by about 2 p.m. how many boats are likely to be parked in back of his restaurant. With spots for up to 40 watercrafts, dock space is almost always available. A special lunch menu at the beach bar is complete with the full realm of appetizers, two-thirds the sandwich options and all the thin-crust pizza you desire.

Summer isn't the only time The Waterfront is finds itself busy.

"This past winter was great," Murphy said. "Good Friday of this year, we had 12 inches of snow — you couldn't get in the place."

For Murphy, the reason he bought The Waterfront and stays in business is simple: "The people. I don't want to say this is a 'Cheers' or anything like that, but there are a lot of people that are here because we're here, so I really love the people."