

NWI DINING @ DUSK INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

By: Mona Dickinson

Step into the Industrial Revolution Eatery and Grille and you'll feel like you've stepped into a moment frozen in time. Valparaiso's newest restaurant and pub opened just two months ago, saluting America's greatness.

Owner Mike Leeson, of Schererville, says he always wanted to open a restaurant. A self-proclaimed risk-taker who owns a steel fabrication business, in Lansing, IL, said he wanted to pay tribute to what made America great.

"I've always had it in the back of my mind that it would be really cool to have a restaurant themed on industry," said Leeson, and no detail was spared in transforming the former Brewski's on U.S. 30 into the new restaurant.

"We gutted everything down to the studs and started from square one," Leeson said. "I wanted it to look like the building was frozen in time, in 1932. Not focusing on the Depression, but instead focusing on bringing back the good times and saluting America's greatness."

The restaurant features laminated steel beams rusted through a chemical process and sealed with a clear coat, distressed woodwork, copper tin ceiling plates, 100 year-old cobble bricks (inside and outside), a G-scale model train on a track suspended above diners, and an outdoor dining area with granite cobblestones.

"It's all dedicated to the people who protect and build this country," Leeson said. "It's a place where we celebrate freedom, progress, innovation, invention, hard work, and the progress of the industrial revolution."

Leeson explained that the clinker bricks used inside and outside the building were actually rejects that were tossed out because they were over-fired. The cobble on the outdoor patio is about 200 years old.

The train makes it way around the restaurant every 15 minutes, complete with smoke, lights and sounds. Photographs throughout depict working class America.

Atop the building's west side, just above the entrance, 11 life-size ironworkers sit along the roof eating their lunch. If the scene looks familiar, the sculptures were created based on the famed 1932 photograph of ironworkers perched on a beam almost 800 feet up during the construction of the Rockefeller Center in New York City called "Lunch Atop a Skyscraper."

The photograph caught the imagination of Italian-born artist Sergio Furnari, who immigrated to the U.S. He was recreating the ironworkers as life-size sculptures at the time of the 911 attacks on the World Trade Center.

As Leeson explained, Furnari quickly completed the sculptures and brought them to Ground Zero, where they were displayed for six months as a tribute to those who built the Twin Towers and those who cleaned up the damage.

The artwork was then taken on a national tour by the sculptor, who then tried to find a good home for them. Leeson not only found the home the artist wanted, he commissioned additional sculptures for his restaurant, including a gentleman saluting guests as they enter; a carpenter working at one end of the bar; and another finishing the concrete on the walk near the entrance.

"The sculptures fit the concept perfectly," said Leeson, noting that the artist himself installed the ironworkers atop the restaurant prior to opening.

The location in Valparaiso worked for its size and because of the region's industrial base, Leeson said. He hopes to open additional Industrial Revolution themed restaurants in other cities built on industry, such as Cleveland and Pittsburgh.

"I think this kind of concept is more fitting in an industrial area," he said. "The whole concept is very special, and it is something a lot of people will have a good feeling about. Hopefully, it will be inspiring to those who dine here."



Guests will also be inspired by words of wisdom – motivational and inspirational quotes that are etched on the brickwork inside the building in an Old Railcar font. Among those quoted are Vince Lombardi, George W. Bush, Albert Einstein, Michael Jordan, Hubert Humphrey and many others.

"The quotes seemed to fit the vision of the place," Leeson said. "We searched and searched for the right quotes, then selected a spot for each one that seemed appropriate."

Most fitting are words from the Lee Greenwood song, "Proud to Be An American," which adorn the outside brickwork near the entrance. Just inside the door, the saluting sculpture sits beneath a wall with the insignias of the Armed Forces, the police and fire departments.

The menu, created by Head Chef Javier Fuentes, features American fare and traditional favorites like hamburgers and pizza, all with a gourmet twist. From its starters to its All-American red, white and blue cheesecake, there is something for everyone.

Mom's Doubleshift Pot Roast has been pretty popular so far, along with the Baja perch tacos, Leeson said. Specialty pizzas are cooked in a brick oven and the kitchen features an open concept design, where guests view the cooks at work.

A variety of appetizers include Molten Cheese Dip, Welded Nachos, Iron Tenders and Brick Oven Wings. House specialty soups include Liberty Chili, Loaded Baked Potato Soup and Vintage Onion Soup. Salad selections can be topped with your choice of chicken, steak or shrimp.

Sandwiches and burgers are served with garlic herbed potato wedges. Of note, on the sandwich menu are the Cajun-blackened Industrial Burger, topped with bleu cheese, red pepper, onion and pepper jack cheese, and the signature Smoked Bacon Burger – a bacon-stuffed burger basted in BBQ sauce, topped with white cheddar on a pretzel roll bun.

Seafood selections include Garlic Shrimp, Grilled Salmon, and the Chef's Creation. Fettucini, mostaccioli and stroganoff are the featured pastas.

Under "Sweet Endings" you'll find the Red, White and Blue cheesecake, home-style bread pudding, Oatmeal Cake, a chocolate crème brulee and All-American apple pie.

In addition, hand-mixed fruit flavored teas are a popular item, Leeson said. The eatery offers weekly specials.

A full service bar is available, complete with 16 beers on tap – most of which are craft beers from local breweries. Camp 4 Nut Brown Ale from the new Figure 8 Brewery in Valparaiso is one of the featured beers (The craft beer is also used in a signature steak sauce on the Valpo Strip Steak). Drafts are served in a "muscle mug."

Adding to the ambiance, TV's throughout the restaurant run loops of "Modern Marvels" and other historical shows related to the restaurant's theme. As an added twist, the men's room has episodes of "The Three Stooges", while the ladies' room offers "I Love Lucy."

Industrial Revolution Eatery and Grille is open from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. on weekdays, and 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. on weekends.