

Valparaiso's Industrial Revolution Eatery marks first birthday

Dining: An aura of greatness

by Larry A. Bretts

One man's palette-pleasing testimonial to America's industrial greatness marks its first birthday with renewed vigor and a fresh, new menu.

The aesthetically and taste-satisfying emporium is the Industrial Revolution Eatery and Grill on U.S. 30 at Linwood Avenue in Valparaiso, which has a theme of America's industrial greatness as its overlying genre. That concept of Made In ... (America) is carried forward to the food, where copious, tasty portions are hand-fashioned, Made in ... Valparaiso. "There is nothing prepared; everything is hand-crafted here," says Michael S. Leeson, proprietor.

Leeson is founding genius and sole-owner. No ownership groups, no partners.

The business's Web site notes:

"Imagine our building is frozen in time since construction in the early 1900's. The men at work are captured in freeze-frame, forever memorialized as monuments to the people who risk their lives to build and protect this great nation that we call America.

"At Industrial Revolution, we celebrate freedom, progress, innovation, hard work, and greatness. Enjoy dining in an environment built by American craftsman using only authentic building materials, many of which were reclaimed. The elements of design fuse together to create an ambiance we call Upscale Industrial.

"Step back to a time when food was made and hand-crafted with the finest of ingredients from our gardens of old. Here we revolutionized the corner stone of every kitchen across our nation to bring you a

of Valparaiso, who worked on the menu for almost past year. "We have a lot of good burgers, salads and seafood," Leeson said. "We wanted to get it right. The reception has been fantastic. Focus

groups helped us dial it all in."

The family oriented restaurant is about 5,000 square-feet in area and is located in a building that has housed a number of restaurants located off the Valparaiso University campus since the 1970s.

Leeson is also president of Synergy Steel Structures, of Lansing, Ill., an aspect that was utilized for the heavy utilization of structural steel inside and outside the building. He opines that it took 2,000 man-hours to fabricate the structural steel, "made the way it used to be made. And it fit like a glove when it was brought on-site."

Leeson suggests he is a businessman, a businessman faced with some challenges.

One is to stand up for America. "We want to motivate people. I don't know why we're not fighting to keep industry here. We're just giving things to

China (and India) on a silver plate."

Patriotism enters into this, too. "We got to stand up for our industries and our jobs. We became the world's super power because we have been able to produce almost everything domestically in the past. That's what makes us a super power."

Another challenge was that of revitalizing the long-vacant building.

"I saw the site and I was challenged. I like taking something that was an eyesore and making it beautiful."

The interior, the exterior, could be



The front entrance of the Industrial Revolution Eatery and Grill features an intricate display of structural steel.

piece of America's finest culinary cuisine at work. We hope you enjoy your dining experience in our pursuit to preserve our heritage, learn about our industrial roots and ultimately leave inspired."

Coinciding with the one-year anniversary is the unveiling of a new menu. "The people wanted more variety. It has been in the works, actually, since we opened," according to Leeson. "We have added some great new stuffed burgers, sandwiches, salads, seafood, pizza and pastas."

He credits much to Chef Javier Fuentes,



A life-size sculpture based on the 1932 photograph, "Lunchtime on a Skyscraper," of ironworkers on a break during construction of Rockefeller Center in New York, graces the west side of Industrial Revolution's roof.

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described as upscale industrial. "The entire build-out is steel, wood, brick. We have no drywall anywhere."

There is steel and brick. So much hand-crafted steel that it almost seems like an oversize Erector set, one that adults can walk through and under with ease.

There are also approximately 50 large black and white photos around the interior, all prepositioned by Leeson; all showing America's past industrial splendor and might – of ironworkers, steelworkers, boilermakers and shipbuilders.

And running on more than 150 feet of miniature track, a large-gauge electric train winds overhead around the dining area and through the brick walls into the kitchen.

Why the train? It is a symbol of power of industry. And it operates over diminutive bridges also hand-crafted and fabricated by Synergy.

The feedback has been very positive, Leeson says. "We're getting a lot of attention locally and out of state. People have wrote or e-mailed me stating it's the greatest place they have seen and happy that it's not in downtown Chicago, but right here in Valparaiso."

Also in Valparaiso is a life-size sculpture by Sergio Furnari, modeled after the iconic 1930s photograph, "Lunchtime on a Skyscraper," showing 11 ironworkers sitting on a beam 800 feet in the air during construction of Rockefeller Center in New York City.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Furnari brought the sculpture to Ground Zero as a tribute to the men who built the twin towers. When it left Ground Zero, Furnari then took it on a cross-country tour, seeking a permanent home.

And Leeson entered the picture. He had come across the sculptor in New York and began

discussions about purchasing the statue set. "After a while, he was comfortable enough to sell it to me.

"I picked the set up in New York and drove them back and he helped us install them."

That home is now 20 feet up, on the top of the Industrial Revolution, looking west over its parking lot.

One aspect of the weekly approach to business is the highlighting of an American hero, major or minor. Last month, it was pioneering cartoon genius Walt Disney. Then it was Marine Lance Cpl. Josh Birchfield, of Westfield, who was killed in Afghanistan on Feb. 19, 2010.

As with all the weekly heroes featured, some special dishes will be created by Fuentes. Some will be to honor the person, some will be favorites of the person, said Jennifer Cowser, manager.

Cowser came on board to help iron out the organizational structure.

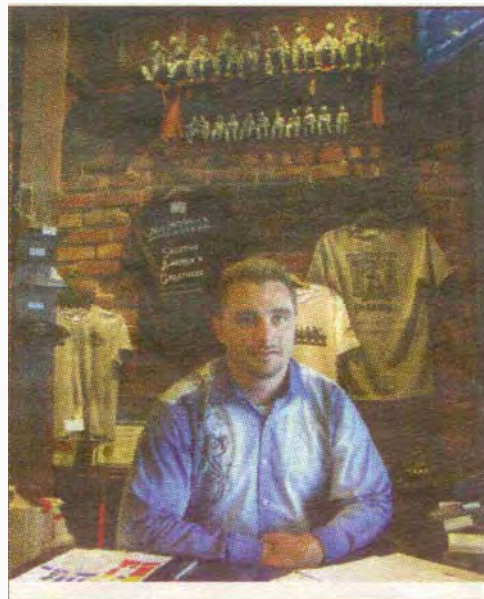
She brings 15 years of experience in food service. She was also in contact with Birchfield's relatives to determine some of the Marine's favorite dishes.

What's the future hold?

Leeson will have to wait. He wouldn't mind opening other similarly themed restaurants. And then, maybe, he would be open to offering Industrial Revolution Eatery franchises.

Hours of operation: Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m. until 9 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. until 10 p.m.

For more information, call 219-465-1801 or visit www.industrialrevolutioneatery.com.



Michael Leeson looks over the interior of the Industrial Revolution Eatery and Grille in Valparaiso.