

VILLAGE INN WINS 'BEST FISH FRY' FOR 2ND YEAR IN A ROW

Contributed story and photos

The Village Inn has successfully defended its first-place title in the "Best Fish Fry" contest sponsored by Niagara Frontier Publications.

Carla Christian and her husband, Paul, of Tonawanda have been coming to the Village Inn for years. The couple were among many who enjoyed a fish fry mid-day on Good Friday this year, along with their friends, Lynn and Dwayne Peacock, also of Tonawanda.

"All of the food is of great caliber," Carla Christian said. "You know the food is great when they're waiting on the picnic benches outside," she said of the restaurant at 1488 Ferry Road, Grand Island.

The Village Inn won 16% of the nominations for 2023, topping its total of 12% in 2022. There were 49 restaurants nominated in the contest, which ran from Feb. 20 through April 2. The Eldredge Bicycle Club of Tonawanda came in second in the NFP contest, and Apple Granny Restaurant in Lewiston won third place honors. The Beach House, also on Grand Island, came in at No. 4.

The Village Inn features gourmet cuisine based on family recipes and the ability of its chefs to delve into new and exciting combinations of flavors for entrees, soups and side dishes. Freshness is a hallmark of the meats, sea-



From left: Village Inn owner Mike Carr shows off the restaurant's classic fish fry, winner of Niagara Frontier Publications' 2023 "Best Fish Fry Contest." • Paul and Carla Christian, foreground, and Lynn and Dwayne Peacock, all of the Town of Tonawanda, are longtime fans of the Village Inn. They are seen here with their server, Kelly Lynn Rastelli of Grand Island, on April 7 at the restaurant, at 1488 Ferry Road, Grand Island. • Mary Walker Carr of South Wales and her brother, John Walker of South Buffalo, enjoy a fish fry at the Village. Visit www.wnypapers.com to see past entries in the "Western New York's Best Fish Fry Hall of Fame."

food and vegetables served there. The restaurant is also known for its friendly atmosphere in a quaint and homey setting within Grand Island's historic Ferry Village. It's somewhat off the beaten path, not on a commercial strip but not far

from the Niagara River and Beaver Island State Park.

Owner Mike Carr credits the customers and the staff with the restaurant's popularity when it comes to the fish fry, as well as the other specials offered daily. Beef on weck and burgers always sell very well, too, along with the award-winning homemade soups and delicious homemade desserts.

Wednesday's special entrees this week included the fish fry, chicken cordon bleu, filet mignon and meatloaf dinner. The five soups offered included the award-winning lemon tabasco clam chowder. The nine homemade desserts ranged from tollhouse and key lime pie to lemon blueberry bread pudding.

Carr said success comes with knowing what your customers want and providing it.

"Having the community in mind always helps when you're trying to fill the restaurant as often as possible," he explained. He said reaching out to the community through social media has kept them in touch with their customers. "We post our specials every day so that people will have a chance to look at what we are presenting every day - that works for us."



Carr provided an example of where the Inn fits in to the local restaurant scene: "There's a lot of pizzerias. They just have to have a consistent product every day, and they get their phone calls. We're a little bit more out of the way and we have to be a little unique every day - and that's our job. It's not necessarily easy to do that, but it's what we do to stay relevant in today's ever-changing marketplace."

He said the restaurant he opened in 1988 is popular with all ages: "I see generations of

kids and grandkids of people my age that they like coming here because it's home to them. I see kids 10 and under saying, 'I want to go to the Village Inn because we like it there.' It's the grandkids of the earliest customers, now that we've been here 35 years. It's become their favorite restaurant. It does make me pretty happy to see that."

Carr, himself, went to the restaurant with his family when he was a kid, when it was Lippens Grill.

"It's a family, community thing,

I guess," he said.

The Village Inn continues to donate to charitable causes both on and off the Island and has become known in that way year-round.

"We give away hundreds of gift certificates a year to different organizations. Now it's become almost 50% off-Grand Island for donations," Carr said.

People who have visited and liked the place in the summer come back in the winter.

"We're not necessarily a destination restaurant, but we're a restaurant where people are re-

minded, 'Hey it's pretty good food over there, so let's go!'" Carr said.

The key, he noted, is to try a little harder, for the sake of the customers and the staff, to achieve excellence. Carr goes to the cities of Buffalo and Niagara Falls to spark new ideas for his restaurant.

"If we keep it simple and homemade, it is noticeably different than other restaurants, because we don't cut the corners by buying premade things to make our soups and specials," he said.

The restaurant sells a lot of seafood during the week, especially the haddock fish fry on Wednesdays and Fridays, and it's always fresh, as are all the daily specials, Carr said. They price the specials to be affordable.

"We've always tried to keep it around \$20 for a meal that includes a salad or soup and then a vegetable or slaw and a side potato," he said.

And for the finishing touch, "We have great desserts - so they sell themselves," Carr said. "We have two to three in-house bakers that make homemade items."

He said some people ask why they need 12 or 15 different desserts on the menu board. "Well, every Saturday night, we sell out by the end of the night," Carr said. He noted crême brûlée bread pudding has been a go-to hot item lately, along with ever-popular pies and cakes. "We're always working on fresh fruit items - the season's just about to start on those again, too."

He said meals they serve are pretty large portions, so often people share a dessert or take them home to enjoy later.

This past October, Carr opened a second restaurant, the Bridgeview Tavern, at 971 E. River Road. The menu features specialties such as beef on weck poutine, shrimp and grits, and Chicago-style hot dogs.

Carr's idea is to keep the two restaurants different from each other, but ensure that both are appealing and current. Carr has developed the Bridgeview Tavern "as nice place, a bar/restaurant to go to, to enjoy and hang out, and not be so food-intense as the Village Inn is," he said.

It has a smaller menu that's intended to be casual and not too elaborate. There are also introductory nights of entertainment.

"There's Trivia Night on the third Wednesday of the month, and the last Wednesday of the month is the Open Mic Night," Carr said. "We have great chicken wings there. ... The price of chicken wings has come down, and it seems we're the only restaurant around that has lowered our prices. We realize what a great gem of a wing we have there."

Carr said they have also introduced a fish fry at the Bridgeview on Friday nights.

The Bridgeview is twice as big as the Village Inn and, as such, is an ideal place for people to gather for small committee meetings, luncheons or dinners, weddings, funerals or class reunions.

"So, we've been getting a lot of business in those areas. That's helped us open the community's eyes to the availability of the venue there," he said. "It's a nice, quaint little place for 30 to 100 people to stop in and have some kind of function there."

"If you want to see someone on Grand Island - an old friend or something - the Village Inn is kind of like the diner or the restaurant that everyone goes to," Carr said. "If you want to see your old classmates, you're going to find them at the Village Inn."

"The Bridgeview is also the best kind of angle. People want to go over there and find an old friend that they haven't seen in a while," he said. "At the Bridgeview, that's where a lot of 'the kids' that are now in their 40s, 50s and 60s are meeting up back there again. Hang out, stop by and say hello. Two guys are having a couple of beers, and two guys are having a water and a pop, and they're playing pool or darts and taking some wings home."

As to the famous fish fry, itself, Carr points to the skill and care

used by cooking staff, including Jared Carr and Mike Vallina, to make a crispy batter that he says can't be beat: "Every day they make sure the batter is nice and thin. They also offer a nice, broiled option, or the Italian broil with a little tomato, mozzarella, parmesan. (Beer-battered and panko-breaded options are also available.)

"And then, after all that, we give a few different choices, but then we give our homemade sides," Carr said. "They've made it so interesting, and they want to make sure it goes out correctly. We make it simple, but we also have those sides like the tuna macaroni salad, the potato pancakes, or whenever we make the German potato salad. The extras - it gives the chefs a thrill to make something that's like, 'OK, we gave you the fish fry, but we also offered you seven other sides that you didn't expect if you've never been here before.'"

"It's the 'wow' factor. It keeps us going when we have the great comebacks, and people telling us, 'We're happy you made those extra choices to put on the plate.'"

In the "Best Fish Fry" contest, readers are polled on their favorites and many add their comments in the nominations.

Here's what some of the fans had to say about the Village Inn.

Matthew T. said of the Inn's fish fry, "It is always cooked perfectly and tastes great!"

Jackie B. said, "Fish is always fresh and cooked to perfection. Choice of sides are all great. Staff is always very friendly and accommodating. Have tried others and always return to the Village."

Joseph S. said, "I have been loving this restaurant for so many years. His fish fry is always cooked to perfection and the sides are all fresh and homemade. I have never had a bad meal at this restaurant. And his soups are the best on the planet too."

Cara I. said, "This is the best fish fry because the staff is always friendly, and courteous, and the speed of service is super-fast. The taste of the food is out of this world. I highly recommend The Village Inn to everyone I know."

The Village Inn is open from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday to Thursday, and from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. It is closed on Sundays.

The Bridgeview Tavern is open from 4-10 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and from 4 p.m. to 1 a.m. Friday and Saturday.

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