

Rock County restaurants singled out in 'Wisconsin Supper Clubs: An Old-Fashioned Experience'



For more than a decade, the Buckhorn Supper Club quietly hosted its summer lobster boils on the eastern shores of **Lake Koshkonong**.

Then, along came Ron Faiola, who filmed the feast, complete with fresh Atlantic lobsters and a flaming fire.



Faiola featured the festive events in his 2011 documentary, "Wisconsin Supper Clubs."

Soon, film viewers wanted their own dining experience with an oak-framed view of the lake. Owners Dawn and Chico Pope added another night to their monthly lobster boil to accommodate extra diners.

"We had people coming from all over the Midwest," Chico said.

The Popes run the supper club on North Charley Bluff Road with the help of their daughter, Shelley Pope Huhnke, who oversees the dining room and bar operations, and their son, Kevin, who oversees the kitchen.

Now, the Popes are seeing a second wave of customers on a mission. Fun-loving foodies on road trips are motoring to the Buckhorn and other restaurants in Faiola's new book, "Wisconsin Supper Clubs: An Old-Fashioned Experience."

“We are seeing many groups every week who have read the book,” Chico said. “Their Bucket List is to visit all the supper clubs in the book. What a great way to see Wisconsin.”

Faiola features 50 supper clubs around the state in his 225-page hats-off to a uniquely Wisconsin tradition. Most supper clubs are family owned and offer slow-paced meals with food made from scratch. Faiola also took the book's color photos, which show off each club's character and classic dishes.

In addition to the Buckhorn, the book highlights four other Rock County supper clubs: The Ding-A-Ling in Hanover and Liberty Inn, Benedetti's and The Butterfly Club, all of Beloit.

In Walworth County, Faiola spotlights the Duck Inn at the corner of Highway 89 and County A. Not surprisingly, duck is the most popular item on the menu, aside from fish during the Friday night fish fry.

“I tried to highlight places that I thought were worth highlighting,” Faiola said. “I wasn't trying to say these are the 50 best supper clubs in the state. Certainly, there could be another 50 or so. But hopefully, this book is a guide to some of them.”

He hit the road for three months last year crisscrossing the state to learn about the people, history and traditions of Wisconsin's authentic supper clubs. Many date to the 1930s and 1940s.

“I saw places that are under the radar,” Faiola said. “You literally have to pass by them on the highway to know they are there.”

Some supper clubs are tucked away in tiny villages or at the end of country roads. They began more than 80 years ago as dance halls, roadhouses and taverns. Then, after World War II, people wanted dining out to be a special experience. Roadhouses and taverns reinvented themselves as classic supper clubs, featuring good company and home-cooked food. They were most popular in the 1950s and the 1960s, when chain restaurants provided little competition. Today, supper clubs seem to be enjoying a comeback as people search for real food and real atmosphere.

Faiola did not eat at all the supper clubs he visited.

“I wasn’t reviewing the food per se,” he said. “But I tried many dishes.”

He sampled chicken gizzards for the first time and didn’t like them. He also tried fried snapping turtle, freshly caught in the Mississippi River, which he enjoyed.

At each club, Faiola took a photo of a brandy old-fashioned sweet, the cocktail of choice.

“If you leave the state and ask for one, they look at you funny,” Faiola said. “They are such an iconic part of the Wisconsin supper club experience.”

At different clubs, the cocktails are put in various kinds of glasses and topped off with an assortment of condiments, including pickled mushrooms and asparagus spears. Some are hand muddled, or prepared with a house mix, and most people want them served with brandy, not whiskey.

When Faiola returned home, he had a new appreciation for supper clubs. But long before he made the movie or wrote the book, he had eaten at the Buckhorn because he has an uncle in Edgerton.

“I had been at the Buckhorn quite a bit,” he said. “It is the epitome of a family-run place. They do a great prime rib, and their homemade desserts are amazing. I had a banana cream pie that was unbelievable.”

While doing research, Faiola discovered that people like to talk about their favorite supper clubs without much prodding.

“We like good food in Wisconsin,” he said, “and we know where to get it.

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