

Slow food: Fish fry at Norm's Hideaway worth trying if you have time

By Joan Neeno

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FORT ATKINSON

Norm Stanley is a man of his word.

When he calls his restaurant a “hideaway,” he’s not kidding. His tavern/restaurant is tucked away on Lake Koshkonong between Busseyville and Fort Atkinson, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. A GPS navigation device might be needed if you decide to visit.

In keeping with the no-nonsense vibe, it’s cash only. The bar has an ATM.

When it’s busy, they make no bones about the fact that you’re going to wait for your food. Perhaps a long time. As the menu says, “Sit back, relax, unwind and look at the wait as a time to enjoy a cocktail of choice and the company of the person(s) you are with instead of getting impatient at us for being busy!!”

Not bad advice. Norm’s Hideaway, by its own description, is “not a supper club but a bar and grill that serves very good food.” Again, Norm is true to his word.

We went with a big group on a lovely Friday night. We started out on the expansive deck that faces the lake—Norm’s has a pier—with beer and Old-Fashioneds. The bartenders muddle the fruit in the Old-Fashioneds, and the cocktails made the wait fly by.

The appetizers are standard—anything that comes in a bag and can be deep-fried. The broccoli poppers (\$4.75) with cheese and bacon were a group favorite. The deepfried mushrooms (\$4.75), however, got a thumbs down on taste and texture. Appetizers come out quickly, though, which helps tide you over.

We placed our order at the bar and waited ... for about an hour. Eventually, we commandeered a big table inside as the evening turned chilly. The tavern was built in 1923 and operated as a family business until Norm bought the place in 2002. The interior was redesigned and now has a north-woods log cabin look. The honey-colored wood glows with relaxed warmth.

The interior is covered with a zoo of stuffed animals, including geese, a bobcat, a baby emu and a white ermine. Norm informed us that most of the animals were from a friend whose second wife banished them from the house. Our friend Jen, a vegetarian, had to face the outside wall because the dead animals were freaking her out. I sympathized, but I found them fascinating.

As promised, the food was worth the wait.

Most people chose a variant of the fish fry, with several ordering the traditional deep-fried cod (\$8.75). The fish was flaky and moist, and the light batter didn't overpower the fish. I ordered the potato pancakes as a side, and they were exceptionally good—crispy outside, moist inside, packed with onion. The plate included syrup and applesauce for the potatoes, but it wasn't needed.

Robin and John both ordered the half-pound of wild-caught bluegill fillets (\$13), which were coated and fried in the same breading. The bluegill wasn't fried into the fish equivalent of a potato chip, which is easy to do with the small, thin fillets. It was flavorful and plentiful.

The Parmesan-crust cod (\$14.50) is dubbed "a real crowd pleaser" on the menu, and once again, Norm isn't fibbing. One of the diners on the deck raved about it, so Nancy and Marcia ordered it. It's fantastic. The filets are broiled twice and topped with a crusted Parmesan sauce. The cheese topping was a rich, bubbly and browned layer of soft, salty perfection on top of beautifully cooked cod.

Richard ordered the Norm's Burger (\$6), which was served on a ciabatta roll with chips and a pickle. While he declared it tasty, he also said it was overcooked and nothing special.

Norm brings out the food himself. If someone were doing a casting call for a "Bad Santa" sequel, he would be a shoe-in. With his white hair and beard, "Easy Rider" vibe, and gruffly charming manner, Norm is central to the experience at Norm's Hideaway.

As he served us, he told us about the tavern's annual corn steam in September and the outdoor grilling on weekends around the Fourth of July.

Norm's Hideaway is packed with devotees for good reason. The drinks are tasty; the vibe is relaxed; the food is very good, and the price is right. It's not a place to go on a tight schedule. But if the week has left you feeling tight in the shoulders, a trip to Norm's with friends is worth the time.

Joan Neeno is a freelance writer who reviews regional restaurants for The Gazette.