

Schuler's Restaurant & Pub shows it can adjust with the times

BY KATHERINE YUNG • FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER • JUNE 7, 2009

As Schuler's Restaurant & Pub celebrates its 100th anniversary this year, Hans Schuler already knows what it will take to keep growing one of the Midwest's top dining destinations during its second century.

"Give the guests what they want and exceed their expectations," said the restaurant's longtime chairman, who at 72 is still busy reading customers' comment cards and figuring out new items to add to the menu.

Located in what Schuler calls the "crossroads of the Big 10" in Marshall, about 60 miles west of Ann Arbor, Schuler's Restaurant has long been a top draw for anyone making a road trips to college football games and visits to Kalamazoo, Chicago and Indianapolis.

But decades of success and numerous fine dining awards haven't stopped the private family owned business from changing with the times. Though it's renowned for its prime beef, Lake Superior whitefish and fresh baked breads, the restaurant adds new menu items four times a year, making sure it stays on top of changing tastes.

As a result, despite the restaurant's early-1900s ambience, customers can find modern dishes like Thai shrimp salad and Mediterranean flatbread pizza, often made with fresh foods grown locally.

So far, the restaurant hasn't been hurt by the downturn in the economy, Schuler said. But to help boost sales, it has taken a number of steps, from expanding the patio of its Winston's Pub to growing its catering and banquet business.

In recent years, the restaurant has also incorporated technology into its operations, adding free WiFi service for customers and taking reservations online.

But there's one thing it always keeps the same: its 175-seat Centennial Room, its main dining area decorated with paintings of late-1800s Marshall buildings and clever sayings from historical figures like Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln.

"The one thing we don't change is this room," said Schuler, who runs the restaurant along with his son Larry. "This is sacred."

Schuler's Restaurant got its start when Albert Schuler Sr., Hans' grandfather, opened a 20-seat restaurant and hotel at the site of the former Royal Hotel and Restaurant, just off the main street in downtown Marshall. In 1940, one of Albert's sons, Win, began the first of several expansions, adding the Centennial Room and space for private parties and banquets. Today, the restaurant boasts 505 seats.

In 1952, Win began serving a tangy orange cheese spread called Win Schuler's Bar-Scheeze.

The spread proved so popular that it eventually was sold in supermarkets in several states before the family sold it to Vlasic Foods Inc. in 1982. These days, the restaurant serves a healthier version of the spread.

The Schulers used to own several restaurants in the state but gradually shut each of them down during the 1980s to focus on the flagship one in Marshall and another in St. Joseph. In Marshall, the business employs 125 full- and part-time workers, including an executive chef, master baker and nine other salaried staff members.

"People are looking for something different, something out of the ordinary," Schuler said about his restaurant's timeless appeal. "We're not like the chains. We can change right on the spot."