

Nationally Famous Chicken Basket Willowbrook, Illinois



Tell Me
**CHICKEN
BASKET**
COCKTAIL LOUNGE



Feb. 26, 1993----

Some inclinations are too tempting to ignore.

A few months ago I ran into Chicago bluesdude Mark Hannon at the Old Town Ale House, a foreboding place where, truthfully, the strangers are fiction. Hannon told me about a gig he had just played with his band, The Fabulous Fish Heads, at a roadhouse restaurant called Dell Rhea's Chicken Basket on Old Route 66 in Willowbrook.

Fish Heads. Rock and blues. Fried Chicken. Old Route 66.

Show me the way.

One trip to the Chicken Basket illustrates the innocent splendor of the Mother Road. In order to reach the Chicken Basket you exit off of Route 83 and navigate through a soulless industrial park that includes a Budgetel Motel, a Denny's restaurant and a Holiday Inn.

Then, on a magical turn around a bend, nestled in a shrubby valley, is the Chicken Basket. It is a panorama of the past. The outside consists of light red brick punctuated by large windows and a Coca-Cola sign. An exquisite red, white and blue neon sign that says "Dell Rhea's Chicken Basket" winks at passersby. The sign has stood in the same spot since 1946.

"One day two women from a local farm came along," said Pat Rhea, the present owner. "They saw how the owner (Irv Kolaric) was doing a brisk business because of Route 66. They offered to teach him how to cook fried chicken if he would buy his eggs and chicken from them. That's where our recipe came from."

The golden-brown chicken was a warm complement for the national acts who occasionally appeared at the Chicken Basket in the '40s and '50s. Rhea said, "In the winter, Irv used to flood the flat roof above the main dining room, let it freeze and he'd have professional ice skaters with lights shining on them to draw people in off the highway."

The Fish Heads - Hannon, guitarist Bob Levis and bassist Harlan Terson (each formerly of the Lonnie Brooks Band) and drummer Bob Carter - will play rock and jump blues in the Roost dining room this weekend.

"It's fun playing there," Hannon said. "Something about the name evokes a feeling. You're on Route 66. There's the cool name Dell Rhea's. You can imagine a band out of Texas called the Del-Rays. The Chicken Basket is a bluesy thing, and we're partly a blues band. I had never heard of it before until we were booked there." And

Hannon has been singing and blowing harp on the Chicago blues scene since the early 1970s when he sat in with Lefty Dizz.

"Not much has changed in the 47 years we've been here." said Rhea, who is 38. "We're not in a lot of the Route 66 books because we've kind of been forgotten. This little section of the road has been passed by." All is not lost. Dell's Rhea's Chicken Basket is a member of the Route 66 Hall of Fame in the lobby of the Dixie Truck Stop in McLean, Ill.

Rhea, who reinstated live music around Thanksgiving, bought the family business in 1986. His father, Dell, died at age 85 in October. Dell Rhea was an executive director of the Chicago Convention Bureau and was instrumental in bringing the 1933 World's Exposition to Chicago.

Between 1943 and 1953 he owned the Woodbine Restaurant, which was across the street from the Chicken Basket. When the Chicken Basket became available in 1963, Rhea fowled through (we couldn't resist one horrible pun) on his dream of owning the restaurant and added his name to the historic sign. "The old highway was dead and the restaurant was dying," his son said.

If you prod Rhea a little bit, you can get him going on the way life used to be. A go-kart track once existed where the Budgetel is. As a kid, he played miniature golf down the old road.

"This was a perfect place to stop, going into the city or coming out of the city for a Sunday drive," Rhea said. "There used to be an (Hinsdale) airport across the street. That's one of the reasons we have all the windows, so people could watch the airplanes. But you can't stay as a little part of rural America because the city is coming out here.

"My main goal is just to keep this as it always was."

POSTSCRIPT:

Mark Hannon became a friend who played harp with Jon Langford at my 2001 "Ticket To Everywhere" book release party at FitzGerald's in Berwyn despite battling lung cancer.

In the spring of 1996 he had two operations to have his lung removed. The cancer returned in March, 2001 and Hannon died in July, 2002--the same month as New Orleans funmeister Ernie K. Doe.

Hannon was 54 years old.