



FISHER'S CLUB • AVON, MINNESOTA

Aug. 31, 2008--

AVON, Minn.----It has been a good trip if you want to put down roots. Unpack. Check out real estate ads by the marriage notices near the obituaries in the local paper. Find a dance partner.

This sense of belonging has only happened a few times in my travels: San Francisco and Coney Island come to mind. And, more recently, during a visit to Fisher's Club in the central Minnesota town of Avon (pop. 1,144). The supper club was opened in 1932 by the feisty George "Showboat" Fisher after he retired from major league baseball. I love old supper clubs almost as much as I love baseball.

Lake Wobegon Days author and "Prairie Home Companion" host Garrison Keillor recently became a partner in the rustic club. Fisher's Club is on the tranquil Middle Spunk Lake and along the Lake Wobegon Trail, a 46-mile path for hiking and biking.

Pop rocker Bobby Vee lives in the neighborhood. He recorded the ballad "47 Wonderful Years" with Sally Fisher, 83, who is married to Showboat's son George "Junior" Fisher, 82. The song is a tribute to Fisher's Club and Avon as much as "New York, New York" honors Jilly's and Manhattan.

As I was getting ready to leave after a Friday night dinner, Showboat's other son, Louie, 80, dropped by with a clear bottle of Minnesota 13 moonshine as a group of us sat on the club's lakeside deck. I wound up drinking the sweet, tequila-type liquor under a full moon that glistened over the lake. And that's before Louie lit the hooch on fire.

I did not want to return to my hotel room in nearby St. Cloud.

"The food is so great and Sally and Junior are such a unique couple," Vee said in a phone conversation. "It's, 'If you don't like the menu, go somewhere else.' "

"I was talking to Sally one day and she said, 'Junior and I took road trips and would go to New Orleans. I'd take out my ukulele and we'd sing songs,' " he said. "So we brought her into my studio. I sang with her-- just barely. She changed the words to that song 'My Buddy' (popularized by Al Jolson and Bobby Darin among others)."

I had to ask Vee if working with Sally was as much fun as the band he had in Fargo, N.D., that briefly included Bob Dylan.

"It sure was," he answered. "She's a saucy singer."

Old-timers debate whether Fisher's is a supper club or a bottle club. It met most of



my criteria for a supper club because of its remote location, low ceilings, screen windows and live entertainment on Saturdays. Handmade posters hang above the bar warning: "Dancers: Do Not Stomp Floor." The lightly breaded walleye -- a secret recipe -- is as crisp as an autumn sunset.

Fisher's is also a bottle club because guests bring in their own bottles of liquor for setups. There are even pine booze lockers for the regulars. Only beer and wine are served at the bar.

"My dad put those lockers in 50 years ago," Junior said, gazing at an empty dance floor where the past was present.

Manager-owner Karl Petters went for the supper club vote.

"At a supper club, people tend to stay for a longer time than they would at another place," he said. "It's a social gathering."

His wife, Karleen, agreed. "We're open only for supper," she said.

Junior doesn't want to call it a supper club because it diminishes any luster of "Fisher's Club." He isn't even so fond of the club's motto: "A Fairly Good Place For Quite Some Time," which, as locals say, sounds like it was "Keillorized."

Indeed. These characters were right out of Lake Wobegon Days.

The dining room's walls are covered in knotty pine.

"It was painted once in 1944 -- and since then it's never been touched," Junior said. On a wall hangs an autographed photo of New York Yankee Johnny Blanchard and a Sporting News-type cartoon outlining Showboat's baseball accomplishments. He had eight hits in his first nine major league at bats.

The dance hall area still sports the original red, white and blue wallpaper.

"They had a jukebox in here at the same place it is at today," Sally said. Today's jukebox includes such songs as "Born to Boogie" by Hank Williams Jr. and "A Jukebox With a Country Song" by Doug Stone.

Junior remembered when baseball legend Ted Williams visited Fisher's Club in 1939. "He was fishing up here and had an hour and a half to get to Minneapolis 80 miles south," Junior said. "He had a date with some gal. And he made it."

Junior and Sally have been married 50 years. They took over the club in 1959 and ran it until 2005, when they sold to a group of investors that included Keillor and Jon Petters, Karl and Karleen's nephew.



"Really, we bought it just to preserve the place," said Jon Petters, who remembers playing cribbage here. "We used to come here when I was a little kid and have deep-fried jumbo frog legs from India."

Every Fisher's Club meal begins with the classic hors d'oeuvre tray featuring meatballs in homemade barbecue sauce, garlic toast, liver pate, pickled herring, crackers, carrots and celery.

"We served it that way for 47 years," Sally said. "Well, we used to have fresh tomatoes."

Up to 400 dinners are served on a peak Friday night. About 60 percent of them are walleye, according to Karl Petters. The spicy coleslaw is based on that served by the legendary 21 Club in New York City.

"My mother got it there when my dad played in New York," Junior said.

The Beeboparebop Rhubarb Pie that has been popularized in "Prairie Home Companion" is baked here from scratch by Alice Thelen, who's lived in Avon for 45 years.

The new group of owners unearthed Fisher's spirited bootlegging history (circa 1933).

"We had the best moonshine in the United States," Jon Petters said. "Because we're in these hills, it was a place the Feds had a hard time cracking. Al Capone came here."

Junior added, "My dad had four, 15-gallon kegs in the attic. Once a day my mom would go up there and shake them. We could not figure out what she was doing."

Sally, a former host at KASM-AM radio station in Albany, Minn., smiled as she recalled getting the occasional ad from a place selling duck-feathered pillows.

"I said to my boss, 'My, they must make a lot of duck-feathered pillows,' " she said. "He said, 'No, that's when the whiskey's ready. That's how they spread the word.' "

It's time to spread the word on Fisher's Club. It is more than a weekend getaway. You may not want to come home.

GETTING THERE: Fisher's Club, 428 Stratford St., Avon, Minn., is almost an eight-hour drive from Chicago. Take I-94 North and exit at Avon (exit No. 153), which is about 80 miles northwest of Minneapolis-St. Paul. Detailed directions at www.fishersclub.com; (320) 356-7372.

WHEN TO GO: Fisher's Club's season runs from the last weekend in April through Oct. 31. It opens daily at 5 p.m; 4 p.m. Sunday. After Labor Day, Fisher's is closed Monday through Wednesday. The month of October is devoted to Oktoberfest and features regional beers and sauerbraten.

LODGING: I stayed at the Radisson Suite Hotel in downtown St. Cloud, about 20 minutes south of Avon; (320) 654-1661, www.radisson.com/stcloudmn.com. There is only one hotel in Avon: the Budget Host Inn, (320)-356-2211, right off of I-94. There are also camping options.

LAKE WOBEGON TRAIL: www.lakewobegontrails.com

HOW SHOWBOAT GOT HIS NICKNAME:

Fisher's Club founder, George "Showboat" Fisher, got his nickname because he dressed better than anyone on his minor league baseball team in Buffalo, N.Y., according to his son Junior Fisher.

Showboat's stint in the majors was strange in that he retired with a Hall of Fame-like .335 batting average in seasons with the Washington Senators (1923-24), St. Louis Cardinals (1930) and St. Louis Browns (1932).

"He hit .374 with the Cardinals and made so much money they shipped him back to the minors," said Junior, who still seems bothered by that transaction.

An avid fisherman and hunter, Showboat decided to open his lakeside club in 1932.

Showboat, who was born on a farm about 5 miles north of Avon, died in the spring of 1994 at the age of 95.