

The Supper Club

By Dave Hoekstra

The Midwest supper club is so out there its characteristics are indelible. The far-flung location only feeds the contained little universe quality of the dining experience. During the 1950s and 60s, supper clubs thrived in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin. A few still exist and they are at the fork in the road between yesterday and today.

A good supper club has a cool, dark setting.

Supper clubs have cloth napkins. And relish trays with carrots, radishes and celery.

A good supper club still has a Friday Night Fish Fry and will serve prime rib on Saturday.

And why are they even called supper clubs? You don't have to join.

Supper clubs are almost always out in the country with a lake and woods view. And out in the country people call "dinner" "supper."

Supper can be served as early as 4:30 p.m. The waitresses who carry your food are usually called Helen, Sally or Gloria. Their smiles are as broad as their shoulders. Supper clubs opened as a one-stop destination where folks would spend an entire evening from a cocktail hour to "night club"-style entertainment after dinner.

By the way, beer is never served on tap at a real supper club. Real supper clubbers drink Old Fashioneds and martinis.

One of the area's more intriguing stops on this circuit is the Establishment Supper Club, 311 Market Street in Benton Harbor. It can be hard to find, although it bends a supper club consideration that it is not in the country.

When the Establishment was first established in 1934 as Max's, it was across the street from the Benton Harbor Fruit Market. At the time it was the world's largest fruit market. Over time the restaurant became Schramm's Green Cow (1950-63) and the Green Orchard Cafe (1964-72). The Establishment Supper Club has been in operation since 1973. A vintage red neon sign on the roof says "Liquor." That is how you find the Establishment.

The supper club serves perch on Friday night and, ta-da . . . prime rib on Saturday. The Establishment was purchased in 2003 by Gunnar Olson, a 40-year-old South Side Chicagoan who used to run Hi Tops (now Harry Caray's) by Wrigley Field. Olson's father Len was a steel salesman who started the Tabor Hill Vineyard near Benton Harbor. The family moved to Berrien Springs when Olson was 2, and he returned to Chicago after studying hotel/restaurant management at Michigan State University.

The Establishment seats about 100 people in a long paneled room. The ceiling is low and the conversations are lower. A long Formica bar has stools for twenty people, north to south. Pine green-colored carpeting hugs the floor.

"See where those two little diamond port-shaped windows are?" Olson asks as he points to a southern wall. "Too many people were going out the windows and they shuttered 'em up. There used to be dancing and pool tables, but it was returned to more of a restaurant in the '70s. Its a great little hideout."

The Establishment's house specialty is the perch, flavored just right by long-time chef Gloria Blanton's spicy breading mix. Walleye can be broiled, deep-fried or potato crusted. The perch comes from small Canadian lakes. Commercial fishing has not been allowed in the Great Lakes since the mid-1980s. "If fishermen from charter boats clean and fillet the fish they catch, we'll cook them," Olson says. "We'll do up a basket for them." The Benton Harbor docks are also

one of the last remaining commercial harbors in Southwest Michigan.

According to the Wisconsin State Historical Society, the first American Supper Club was established in Beverly Hills, California, by Milwaukee native Lawrence Frank. His menu included prime rib, mashed potatoes, creamed corn, sweet peas and Yorkshire pudding. Frank also introduced the doggie bag to an increasingly mobile American menu.

It's worth a road trip to check out the new Jo Jo's Americana Supper Club, 107 Blue Star Highway in Douglas. Jo Jo's is virtually a supper club by accident. It meets the criteria of live entertainment (Kevin Cavanaugh sings and plays piano on Friday and Saturday nights), cloth napkins and a cool dark setting. Jo Jo's used to be a biker bar on the outskirts of town called Ye Olde Woodshed.

Los Angeles actor-chef Joey Santos opened the supper club in August, 2007. He had been vacationing in Saugatuck on an annual basis since 2002. Santos played cop Officer Aiello in the television series *NYPD Blue*. His father, Joe Santos, Sr., appeared on the hit television shows *The Rockford Files* and *The Sopranos*.

"Jo-Jo is my nickname," Santos explains during a conversation at the 100-seat supper club. "Americana is a nice way to describe my regional cooking. We labored over whether to call it a cafe or bistro. I like the down-home cooking of a juke joint, but I wanted the atmosphere of a supper club: entertainment, a bar, low light."

Santos, 42, is a bit winded. He has just driven in from Gerald R. Ford International Airport in Grand Rapids after spending a week in New York City. One of his bartenders had appeared in a bartending segment on *The Tyra Banks Show*. And one of Santos' best friends is supermodel Janice Dickinson, star of the hit Oxygen network series *The Janice Dickinson Modeling Agency*.

"I met her through Iman [David Bowie's wife] about five years ago," Santos says. She has dined at the supper club, as has Joe Santos, Sr. He ate green ants with Dickinson when they were "trapped" in Australia on the reality show *I'm a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here*.

Jo Jo's is the most Hollywood supper club in Michigan.

Santos operated a catering company in Los Angeles. One of his main clients was late television producer Norman Lear. Santos prepared meals for Elizabeth Taylor, Warren Beatty and Barbra Streisand at Lear's house. "When Elizabeth was there, I did a Mediterranean menu with paellas and tapas." It was all in the family.

"Here, I take the freshness of California with barbecue, around to the South with the cornbread, and try to round it off into the Midwest," says Santos, a self-taught chef. "I wanted to have comfort behind it. Then I offset that with fresh seafood, changing with scallops, shrimp or perch [supper club!]." During an October visit I had the truly unique turkey meatloaf made with diced green apples and moist peach chutney, coated with molasses gravy. It was served over collard greens that provide a necessary bitter texture and a small side cup of macaroni and cheese. During season Santos purchases vegetables from farmers' markets in Holland and Saugatuck.

As I dined Cavanaugh played his Beatles medley ("You Won't See Me"/"Strawberry Fields") along with requests like "I Get a Kick out of You" and "I Left My Heart in San Francisco." Jo Jo's has a happy hour between 4 and 7 p.m. on Monday through Friday. Regulars enjoy the colorful range of cosmopolitans and the house drink "The Johito," mojitos with coconut, pineapple, blueberry and raspberry. These drinkers are not holdovers from the biker bar.

Santos gutted the old bar but retained the original hardwood floor and bar rail with original

carvings. “The carvings are part of the history,” he says. One typical carving declares, “We ain’t right and we’re fixin’ to get worser.” The bar is made out of reinvented barnwood from the biker bar. Santos bought the restaurant’s long oak pews from a church in Muskegon, and he added supper clubby red lanterns that hang from the ceiling.

The feeling recalls a smaller version of Tillman’s Roadhouse, which opened in 1920 in rural Charlevoix, about 45 miles north of Traverse City. Today it is the Argonne Supper Club.

“There was gambling and ladies of the evening,” says Argonne owner Steve Ager. “The owner lost a brother in World War I in the Argonne Forest in France. That name stuck.”

The Argonne meets almost all supper club criteria. It looks like a resort house set on six acres off of Boyne City Road and across the street from a dense forest. A majestic White Michigan Pine sits by the supper club front door. A yellow picnic table is perched in the front yard. The large dining room is finished with oak and pine trim. There’s a scenic, rural view from a myriad of windows. Deer and wild turkey wander around the front yard.

The building’s exterior features thin ’60s-style brick slate accented by striped green awnings. The slate is from nearby Lake Michigan, just as the Wisconsin supper clubs deployed Lannostone, a late 1950s building material that mildly mimicked the rectangular geometry of modern art.

In 1961 Ager’s parents Clara and Ted purchased the supper club, which was known for all-you-can-eat shrimp. They inherited the wooden tables, green tiled floors and menus on paper placemats. “When they bought it, all-you-can-eat shrimp was \$2.95,” he says. “We stopped doing all-you-can-eat last year. It was \$29.95.” Still, 70 percent of the supper club’s orders are the shrimp, which Ager brings in from the Gulf of Mexico. The restaurant’s whitefish and perch are caught in Lake Michigan by Native Americans and shipped to John Cross Fisheries on the harbor in Charlevoix, where the catch is cut.

Like a good supper club, the Argonne has cloth napkins and a charbroiled New York Strip Steak on Saturday.

The homemade bread is made from a German recipe that belonged to Ager’s Grandmother Speigle. “A single batch is 36 loaves, a double batch is 72 loaves, made every day,” he says. The bread is power packed with sugar. “Almost everything here is homemade.”

Steve Ager started running the Argonne in 1969. His wife Michelle generally manages the supper club. Their daughter Stacey works behind the bar. And Steve’s 27-year-old nephew Kevin Whitley is chef. Steve’s father died in 1987. An orange and green oil portrait of Clara Ager hangs behind the bar, just as it has done since 1962. The elegant portrait was made by a regular customer.

“We had regular entertainment about 20 years ago,” Ager says. “We stopped because we pretty much were working for the band.” But in late summer 2008 he began booking the duo “Night Moves” with Maggie (on vocals) and Jeff (on backing tapes) on Friday and Saturday nights. Maggie moves around the supper club singing Barbra Streisand covers and other pop songs tableside to the diners. And yes, Michigan rocker Bob Seger—who wrote “Night Moves”—ate at the supper club in the early ’80s.

Ager understands that beer is never served on tap at a real supper club.

“Well, now I have twelve taps,” he sighs. “The reason for that is Michigan’s return bottle law (10 cent deposit on each bottle). I got tired of messing with that. It’s easy to walk out the door with cases of beer. It takes a big boy to walk out the door with a keg.”

Ager, 60, is entrenched in supper club history. He grew up in one of the four bedrooms above the supper club. “I was born and raised here,” he says. “My dad was born here. My

mother was born on the other side of town. My grandfather was born here. My great-grandmother came here from Canada in the 1870s.”

His father’s ashes are buried near the pine tree in front of the Argonne. A headstone commemorates his time with the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II. Ager’s children are sure to keep the Argonne going.

Supper clubs are built that way.

The Establishment Supper Club
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