

Shellfish to offer fine dining

Shellfish Sports Bar & Grille

March 17, 2009 - 10:27 p.m.

PORT LAVACA - Karen Labarbera melted over her dinner salad's anchovy dressing.

"Oh, yes it was great," the varsity tennis coach said.

The gourmet burger with grilled onions and mushrooms quelled her hunger. She and neighbor Patty Tidwell of Port Lavaca heard rumblings of how the bar area for the Shellfish Sports Bar & Grille had started serving customers and wanted to check out the new scene.

Both adored the warm chocolate-and-cream atmosphere of the bar, replete with 12 flat-screen televisions, hardwood floors and high warehouse ceilings that added to its urban-style interior.

"It's about time Port Lavaca got something you can go to," Tidwell said.

"With class," Labarbera added.

The sports bar officially opened March 9 and customers like Labarbera eagerly anticipate the fine dining side of the restaurant opening around the first week of April.

Owners Al and Dianna Stanger of Port Lavaca bought the property on state Highway 35 overlooking Lavaca Bay in 2007 and brought in accomplished chef David Weigandt, who ran his own restaurant in Sidney, Ohio, to serve as executive chef and general manager.

The Shellfish quickly became Weigandt's baby, as he headed the design and concept of the restaurant and worked long hours during its construction. He engineered the idea for an open kitchen in the Grille not only to gauge reaction to his dishes, but as a way to manage the house.

Months down the road, he hopes the bar facing that kitchen would become a chef's table, where he can design a menu for his guests and take them through the cooking process. The Johnson and Wales-educated chef challenges himself to change up the menu almost daily and to offer the freshest ingredients according to the season.

Trained staff could also walk guests through selecting wines from the 1,500-bottle capacity cellar.

"Basically, I want the guest from start to finish to feel, 'Wow,'" Weigandt said. "When they're walking out the door, I want them to be counting the minutes until they come back again."

The 39-year-old hopes to build a relationship with the community where the 5,000-square-foot restaurant would serve as a gathering place for Port Lavacans. The restaurant offers a more upscale atmosphere that residents couldn't get before without driving 90 miles away.

Weigandt envisions Port Lavaca becoming a downtown destination drawing customers from Corpus Christi to south of Houston.

Lacey Ekberg, executive director for the Port Lavaca Chamber of Commerce, agreed.

"It's very unique. It's very high-end," Ekberg said. "I think it's going to have a very regional draw."

Russell Cain, realtor with Coldwell Banker Russell Cain in Port Lavaca, also believes the restaurant will drive tourism.

Shellfish's roughly 60 local staff members seem on board and ready to excite the town. Charles Knisley, known for his cheesecake, joined the effort as sous chef.

Labarbera and Tidwell left as satisfied customers and plan to come back to visit the Shellfish. They looked across the lobby at the Grille's doors and said they couldn't wait to see what the Shellfish could dish out next.

Tidwell took a Shellfish burger home for her husband and thought how high schoolers will finally have a place to go in town for prom.

Owner Dianna Stanger, who sat in the lounge area of the bar, watched the customers leave. She smiled when told of their compliments.

"We figured if we wanted it, other people in the area did as well," she said.

Evolution of the Shellfish:



1896: F.S. Montier serves dishes from home

1904: Montier opens the Shell Fish Cafe, a French bakery known for its crab omelet, at East Railroad and Commerce streets

1922: Montier's son Frank F. Montier takes over management

1928: Cafe moves to downtown location at Commerce Street and U.S. Highway 87

1946: Frank Montier's son-in-law Herluf Westerholm acquires ownership, calling it the Shell Fish Restaurant

1965: Moves to location on state Highway 35 overlooking Lavaca Bay

1981: Westerholm sells it to Virgil Conrad of Corpus Christi, but buys it back in 1984

1985: Westerholm closes it down and the Cheshire family of Victoria buys it at a trustee's sale. The Cheshires eventually open the site as Gordon's Restaurant

2007: Al and Dianna Stanger of Port Lavaca purchase Gordon's Restaurant and begin new construction of Shellfish Sports Bar & Grille

March 2009: Shellfish sports bar opens for business

April 2009: Grille to open to customers

Sources: Calhoun County Museum, Advocate articles from Feb. 8, 1965 and Aug. 8, 1985

If You Go

Shellfish Sports Bar & Grille

2615 N. state Highway 35 in Port Lavaca

Sports bar hours: Sunday through Thursday 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., Friday and Saturday till midnight

Kitchen closes at 9 p.m.

For more information, visit www.shellfishdining.com or call 361-552-5300.