



The Holy Mackerel

by Rich Belmont

Elizabeth, Illinois, home of the Apple River Fort, is a small town with a population of about 760 people. It's East on Highway 20 only 35 minutes and 30 miles from the Julien Dubuque Bridge and 15 minutes and 15 miles from Galena. I confess I only considered Elizabeth a place to drive through on my way to Chicago. Well, not anymore, my foodie friends, Elizabeth is now a destination and a frequent one at that!



That's because it is the home of The Holy Mackerel. This is one of those rare finds: a big city restaurant in a small town. I suppose you can say this mackerel is holy because it is inside a building originally constructed circa 1874 as a Presbyterian Church.

It was situated on a curve in a trail built in 1832 called Mail Trace, an Illinois stagecoach road winding through Galena, Kellogg's Grove and Dixon and then on to Fort Dearborn (Chicago) or Fort Clark (Peoria).



Several years ago the Church was restored to its original glory by Pat Frain who turned it into The Wedding Chapel. Pat sold it to William and Jennifer Wilson who continued doing weddings for a few more years. Then in 2009 Dan Kretschmer and his wife Denise purchased the church and created The Holy Mackerel.



This little chapel now took on a new life as a Steak and Seafood Joint as Dan calls it. Now according to my dictionary one of the definitions of joint is a slang term for a cheap bar or nightclub. Well Dan, your Holy Mackerel is no joint. Rather it is an outstanding fine dining establishment hidden in plain sight on Highway 20 in Elizabeth!

Judging from the credentials of its owners the Holy Mackerel was destined to be a culinary Mecca for exquisite taste seekers. Master Chef Dan is from Lake Geneva,

Wisconsin. Over 45 years ago he was hired at The Playboy Club and quickly became the star student of renowned Chef Jacquie formerly of Le Maximilien in Paris, France. He went on to influence the kitchens of The Red Geranium and Charley O's both in Lake Geneva. He was also a chef at the Wisconsin Club in Rochester, WI and Auctioneer's Inn in Kansasville, Wisconsin.

It was at the Auctioneer's Inn Dan gained the experience and expertise necessary to be given the title Master Chef. Back in the day the Auctioneer's Inn, which was in the middle of a cornfield, was a hangout for celebrities who were doing shows in Chicago and Milwaukee. Big name stars would go to The Playboy Club and then be taken by helicopter to the Auctioneer's Inn. The likes of Vic Damone, Sonny & Cher and Liberace would enjoy themselves in relative seclusion. They expected the best food money could buy and money was no object.

Master Chef Dan attributes a great deal of his success to the owner of the Auctioneer's Inn, the late Colonel Hope L. Waldecker (1927-2003). She was a celebrity in her own right. After graduating from Wellesley College with degrees in German and French she joined the US Army and was an interpreter at the Nuremberg Trials. She was also the first model for Shalimar Perfume and was a certified auctioneer (hence the title Colonel). She owned and operated the Auctioneer's Inn for 33 years.

Dan's wife Denise is the Pastry Chef at The Holy Mackerel. She developed her expertise cooking at the French Country Inn and baking at Grandview Restaurant in the Geneva Inn.



Their restaurant is a family business. Their son, Waylon, is the Sous Chef when he is not working as Chef at The Cove Restaurant in Apple River. Daughter Allison is a hostess and waitress and daughter Gwen Benson is General Manager and waitress. Their daughter-in-law, Gina, also works in the business as well as friend Candy Bailey.



This restaurant operates on a simple principle: fresh ingredients, simply prepared. All sauces, dressings, purées and even the ice cream are made in-house. None of these items are held over from one week to the next. Anything not used by Sunday night is discarded.

Most of the menu entrees are cooked simply with only white wine, butter, olive oil, garlic and chicken stock.

All of the appetizers are delicious so it's hard to single a couple of them out (see photos atop this page). The Portabella Mushrooms are stuffed with sautéed sweet Italian sausage and provolone cheese. The Flat Bread is made from Denise's homemade dough and is covered with diced tomatoes, spinach, garlic, olive oil and provolone. The Mackerel Cakes are named after the restaurant and not because they are made from mackerel. In fact, they are prepared from a combination of shrimp, scallops and lump crab before being coated with Panko bread crumbs and baked. By the way, there is no deep fryer in this restaurant so you won't find French fries anywhere on the menu.

The Holy Mackerel

113 South Main Street, Elizabeth, IL 61028
815-858-3636 | www.HolyMackerelElizabeth.com

HOURS: Thu – Sun, 5 p.m. -Close, Mon-Wed, Closed
DINING STYLE: Casual **NOISE LEVEL:** Conversational

RECOMMENDATIONS: Flat Bread, Stuffed Portabella, House Salad with Chicken, Roasted Canadian Walleye, Baked Pacific Salmon, Sea Scallops, Grilled Ahi Tuna, Giant Prawns, Beef Tenderloin and Shrimp or Lobster Skewer, Stuffed Chicken Breast, Rack of Lamb, New York Strip or Ribeye Steak, Bread Pudding, Fruit Pies especially Dark Cherry

LIQUOR SERVICE: Full Bar **PRICES:** \$15.95 to \$36.95

PAYMENT: Cash, Debit, Checks, Credit (No AMEX)

ACCESSIBILITY: Side Door and Restrooms

KIDS POLICY: No Menu, No High Chair, No Booster

RESERVATIONS: Recommended, Appreciated on Fri/Sat

CATERING: No **TAKE OUT:** Yes **DELIVERY:** No

PARKING: On street and close public parking.

After you have appetizers your waitress will bring a basket of fresh baked rolls and croissants (Kwah-Sahnts). These are just fabulous and you will find you cannot eat just one. Not to worry, though, because if you ask your server nicely she will be happy to bring you some more!



The steaks are USDA Choice Grade, hand-cut by the Chef and purposely oversized. For example, the New York Strip is listed at 16 ounces but is really closer to 20. The steaks are charbroiled so take the time to look at the grill marks. They are perfectly etched on both sides. This is one of the signs of an experienced chef!

If you like your steak rare this is a good place to ask for a Pittsburgh Style Steak. Only the best steakhouses know what this is. Pittsburgh Rare, also known as a Black and Blue, is any steak heated to a very high temperature very quickly so it is charred on the outside but still very rare on the inside. Many foodies say this is the only way to enjoy high quality steaks.

Master Chef Dan says his seafood is prepared simply. And he is right, it is simply magnificent! The Roasted Canadian Walleye is very popular because it is prepared with special herbs and white wine. The Baked or Grilled Pacific Salmon comes with an enticing olive relish. The Sea Scallops are sautéed in white wine, olive oil and a little garlic. Ahi Tuna is grilled with fire roasted red bell pepper, garlic and tomato purée. And of course no top steak and seafood house would be without lobster. Chef Dan only serves Canadian Cold Water Lobster



Tails. They have whiter meat and are considered more tender than warm water tails because they grown slower in cold water. You can order Twin Lobster Tails with drawn butter or the way I prefer: skewered with Beef Tenderloin.



While I am thinking of skewers I am reminded how much I enjoyed the Beef Tenderloin and Gulf Shrimp. Only Wild Caught Shrimp from Galveston, Texas are served here. They are harvested with trawls which are cone shaped nets towed along the bottom in waters near shore. Here is an interesting fun fact: the commercial harvesting of shrimp from Galveston Bay amounts to an annual harvest averaging 3.5 million pounds with a value of approximately 6.5 million dollars.

The Prawns here are an excellent choice too. They are Super Colossal size (4 to 6 per pound) resembling miniature lobsters with sweet, succulent meat.



A great way to enjoy your choice of Chicken, Beef, Scallops or Shrimp is in a Provencale (Pro-vohn-sahl) (above). This means your meat or seafood comes to you on a bed of sautéed green and red peppers, onions, mushrooms and garlic. On a recent visit members of my tasting team also enjoyed a fabulous Chicken Breast stuffed with smoked ham, spinach, pine nuts and provolone and covered with a white wine and herb cream sauce. They raved about the Roasted New Zealand Rack of Lamb with Bordeaux peppercorn sauce.



There is a nice selection of beers to choose from and a trendy collection of wines. The wine selections are all favorites of the Chef. Wine by the glass is reasonably priced between \$6.50 to \$7.50.

Groups of 10 or more can book private parties on Monday through Wednesday nights. The Holy Mackerel will be open for dinner New Years Eve. Master Chef Dan is planning some truly memorable entrées to help celebrate the New Year.



Do you recall my saying Denise is a Master Pastry Chef? Of course you must try some of her luscious desserts! The signature dessert is the awesome Cranberry White Chocolate Pecan Bread Pudding with Bourbon Sauce. The Turtle

Cheesecake, Chocolate Raspberry Cheesecake and Flourless Chocolate Cake with homemade ice cream are all sensational. And the fruit pies are as good as you will find anywhere. On the night we visited my team had a choice of Apple, Blueberry, Rhubarb, Mixed Berry, and my favorite, Dark Cherry.

So now you know: in a town called Elizabeth there is a Steak and Seafood Joint called The Holy Mackerel. And it specializes in food called Haute Cuisine!