



Kalmes Restaurant

by Rich Belmont



Go to the intersection of Highways 151 and 52 South of Dubuque. Go South on Highway 52 towards Bellevue for 10 miles and 10 minutes. You will find yourself smack in the middle of Saint Donatus, Iowa. Don't blink, or else you will have missed it.

Saint Donatus is a tiny town. It only has a population of about 150, yet lays four claims to fame.

First, it is named in honor of, and has a Catholic Church dedicated to Saint Donatus of Bad Münstereifel, Germany. He was a 2nd century Roman soldier who at age 17 enlisted in the 12th Legion Fulminatrix (Thundering Legion). He worked his way up the ranks and was appointed a personal bodyguard to Emperor Marcus Aurelius. During the Marcomannic Wars his unit was surrounded and almost destroyed but was saved by a miraculous thunderstorm. Legend has it Donatus was a leader of Christian soldiers who prayed for such a miracle. Upon being saved Donatus gave thanks to God instead of to Aurelius and was promptly martyred by the Emperor. Saint Donatus is the Patron of Lightening Strikes.

Second, the town of Saint Donatus is known for its status as a Luxembourger Village. This designation refers to several Midwestern villages with a large population of ancestors of immigrants from Luxembourg. This landlocked country is bordered by Belgium, France and Germany. Besides Saint Donatus, Luxembourg Societies are located in other places including Remsen and Preston, Iowa; Belgium and New Luxembourg, Wisconsin; and Rollingstone and New Ulm, Minnesota.



Third, the Gehlen Barn built in 1939 is the oldest still-standing barn in Iowa. It's right behind the Gehlen House Bed and Breakfast which is across from Kalmes Restaurant and is part of the Kalmes complex. Peter Gehlen, a flour mill owner, built the barn and later moved to Remsen, Iowa, another Luxembourger Village. He was one of the founding fathers of Gehlen Catholic High School in nearby Le Mars, Iowa.



Fourth, Saint Donatus is home to Kalmes Restaurant. The Kalmes family has been serving the Luxembourg Village of Saint Donatus for almost 160 years! Their enterprise is a bar, restaurant, convenience store, gas station, catering business and unofficial Saint Donatus town hall. Certainly Kalmes is well known throughout the Tri-States for its Luxembourgian cuisine. Its fame is countrywide, though, thanks to being featured on Alton Brown's TV program: Feasting on Asphalt, Mid-American Pie Episode. In fact, three of the Kalmes Family recipes are now immortalized in Alton Brown's Feasting on Asphalt, the River Run book published in 2008. It's a chronology of his second culinary expedition started in Venice Louisiana on April 19, 2007 and ending in Itasca State Park, Minnesota. He and his crew enjoyed "Good Eats" at Kalmes Restaurant on Day 20 of that trip.



The Kalmes story begins with Peter and Anna Kalmes who came to this country from Nospelt, Luxembourg sometime around 1840. Peter was a skilled sausage maker who found his way to the Luxembourg Village of Saint Donatus. In the early 1850's he started a bar business in the red pebble stone building across the street from the current Kalmes Restaurant just north of the Gehlen House.

In 1933, Theodore and Stella Kalmes purchased the present property and built a small bar and gas station. They added a grocery store and upstairs living quarters in 1942.

Lawrence, grandson of Peter, and his wife Helen (married 56 blissful years so far, at right) bought the business from his father in 1956. They opened a dining room in 1982, remodeled in 1988 and added the Luxembourg dining room in 1995. By the way, Lawrence goes by the nickname Windy. He was given that moniker years ago by some of his customers who said he talked too much!

Windy and Helen are still in the kitchen every day. However, they have turned



over the daily operations to three of their children. Jim and his wife Lori (left), Brian and his wife Barb and Jodi Hingtgen and her husband Willie. Jim is in charge. He has been cooking in this very same kitchen for 37 years already and there isn't anything he doesn't know about the tastes of Luxembourgers. Actually, their cuisine for the most part is German peasant food.

Jimmy's son Jimmy Jr., a fifth generation Kalmes, is now running the catering department. It's a huge operation considering it has seven vehicles and several trailer mounted grills and is typically doing 4 to 12 events every week as far away as Madison and Des Moines. They typically cater to 30 to 1200 people and routinely do 2 or 3 parties in the same day. They have fried as many as 4600 pieces of chicken or grilled 1400 Ribeye steaks in a single day!

Kalmes Restaurant

100 N. Main Street, Saint Donatus, IA 52071
563-773-2480 • www.GehlenHouse.com

HOURS: Mon – Sat: 7:30 a.m. – 9 p.m., Sun: 8 a.m. – 8 p.m.

DINING STYLE: Come as you are

NOISE LEVEL: Conversational

RECOMMENDATIONS: Hamburger, Olive Burger, Pork Tenderloin, Kraut Pork Sausage Sandwich, Wiener Schnitzel, Fried Chicken Livers, Luxembourg Ground Steak, Ribeye, Ham Steak, All-You-Can-Eat Friday Fish Fry, Fried Chicken, Luxembourg Buttered Noodles

LIQUOR SERVICE: Full Bar

PRICE RANGE: Breakfast: \$3.59 - \$11.99

Lunch: \$2.09 - \$8.39 Dinner: \$3.99 - \$18.99

PAYMENT OPTIONS: Cash, Debit, All Credit Cards except AMEX, NO checks, ATM on premises

ACCESSIBILITY: Front Door & Restrooms

KIDS POLICY: Menu, Booster, Highchairs

RESERVATIONS: Yes **CATERING:** Yes

TAKE OUT: Yes **DELIVERY:** No **PARKING:** Private Lot

Kalmes is open 7 days a week for breakfast, lunch and dinner. The breakfast menu includes all the usual favorites: eggs, toast, ham, bacon, sausage, French toast, pancakes, and omelets. The truly outstanding item, though, is the home made sausage! Kraut pork sausage, Tripen in Luxembourgish, is made from a 150 year old recipe handed down from Peter Kalmes. This mild, plump sausage is full of old world flavor and is superb with sauerkraut. You can order it anytime during the day. It's so popular you can buy it in the grocery and enjoy it at home.



The hamburgers are exceptional. Hand-ground beef mixed with Ribeye steak trimmings are hand-formed and loosely shaped. In 1999 Old Jazzbo of Dubuque (the late Thomas Gifford) declared Kalmes the World's Greatest Burger and Winner of the Golden Burger Award. This is what Old Jazzbo wrote: "The half-pounder, well done, plain or with a slice of onion, Heinz 57 sauce, ketchup or mustard is absolute perfection. Done uniformly all the way through, unfailingly rich and juicy."

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Another popular lunch sandwich is the Fried Pork Tenderloin. Hand-cut pork is tenderized until it is only 1/3 inch thick. It is tossed with pepper, Kalmes Steak Seasoning and bread crumbs, then brushed with oil and fried on a griddle. Incidentally, Kalmes Steak Seasoning is wonderful on just about any meat. It is available in the Kalmes Grocery and at many other food suppliers in the tri-state area. I use it at home on steaks, pork loins and chicken. The Reuben is good: corned beef, sauerkraut, Swiss cheese and 1000 Island dressing. The Slider is an interesting diversion from the usual sandwiches: sliced and grilled summer sausage, pressed pork and pressed ham with lettuce, mayo and cheese on a sesame bun.



There is a Noon Special Monday through Friday that is guaranteed to be worth the drive to Saint Donatus. For example, this week on Tuesday it was 3 pieces of chicken with mashed potatoes and green beans. On Wednesday it was roast pork with mashed potatoes and corn and on Thursday Polish sausage and sauerkraut.

Dinners at Kalmes can be irresistible. The Ribeye is the signature steak. It is aged 21 days and hand-cut. It's



well marbled and yet is served without needing too much trimming. By the way, all steaks can be ordered sizzling from the griddle or charbroiled. Prime Rib is slow roasted for 6 to 7 hours so it is only available on Friday and Saturday nights.



As much as I like a Kalmes T-Bone or Top Sirloin, I have determined my favorite steak is the Luxembourg Ground Steak. This is a beef patty mixed with egg, cracker crumbs and onions, grilled then smothered with homemade cream of mushroom sauce.

Helen's Fried Chicken is as good as it gets. It is cooked in a controlled low pressure, lower temperature fryer and is always juicy and never dried out. Speaking of chicken, the Cordon bleu is unusual since it has bacon in addition to ham and Swiss cheese and is covered with Cream of Mushroom gravy. If you like Chicken Livers this is the place to get them. They are fresh and crispy fried and served with a scrumptious cocktail sauce. Alton Brown states in his book the Kalmes Fried Chicken Livers are the best he has ever had.



My tasting team was very impressed with a few other entrées as well. Like the bone-in hardwood smoked Ham Steak, which is more ham than any two people can eat. So too the Turkey Fillet Mignon, grilled fresh turkey wrapped in bacon and the Seafood Platter including 6 shrimp scampi, 8 breaded shrimp, two pieces of cod and 3 scallops.



Without a doubt, my favorite Kalmes dinner is the Wiener Schnitzel. A hand-cut veal cutlet is rolled in cracker-meal breading and eggs and is served with choice of noodle or potato. As you can see, I always ask for the famous Luxembourg buttered noodles! Everybody has enjoyed the Luxembourg noodles, right? Windy still makes them with the assistance of daughter Jodi. They mix flour, eggs, a little oil and some seasonings together and then add more flour until the dough is just right. Then they meticulously roll and cut the dough into strips. After the noodles are boiled they are sautéed with crumbled saltine crackers and butter. If you are one of the few who haven't pigged out on Luxembourg noodles you owe it to yourself to get to Saint Donatus as soon as possible!

After a totally satisfying dinner at Kalmes Restaurant a little something sweet is in order. There is always a delicious cake on the salad bar and sometimes there is a special dessert. For instance, autumn is apple season so a tantalizing Apple Tart is waiting for you. It's made from scratch with a flaky hand-folded pastry shell, apples from a local orchard and a drizzling of sweet caramel sauce.



You cannot be in business for 160 years without garnering a whole slew of awards and accolades. Here is a sampling from just the past few years: 2000 – Jackson County Beef Backer Award. 2001 – Iowa Restaurateur of the Year, awarded by the Iowa Hospitality Association, 2006 – Restaurant Neighbor Award from the National Restaurant Association, 2010 & 2011 – Hospice of Dubuque Best Fest Best Caterer and Best Place for Prime Rib, 2012 – Windy Kalmes, Champion of the Year by the Iowa Restaurant Association recognizing a lifetime of Advocacy for Iowa's Hospitality Industry.

So a visit to Kalmes Restaurant is an opportunity. An opportunity to enjoy some satisfying, unpretentious meals at very reasonable prices prepared by a very experienced staff. And an opportunity to encounter a little piece of Iowa history, Roman legend and Luxembourg culture. All in little Saint Donatus – who knew?