

DINING

Fran O'Brien's is crustacean headquarters

BY ELEANOR & RAY HEALD
SPECIAL WRITERS

If it has a shell, it's on the menu! Crustaceans are king here. For seven years, Fran O'Brien's Maryland Crab House on Opdyke in Auburn Hills has been crackin' 'em, peelin' 'em, spicin' and steamin' 'em while claiming that if you eat fish, you'll live long; eat oysters, you'll love longer; but if you eat clams, you'll last longer!

Managing partner Dan Dunskey hypes his seafood tavern-style restaurant as your official crustacean headquarters. Diane and Ken Lahti of Bloomfield Township like the concept. Once a month, whether they need it or not, they come for clam chowder \$3.25, snow crab legs \$22, or a half-pound of peeled-and-eat shrimp \$7, all washed down with one of the many wines (served by the glass or bottle) or a draft beer from the selection of six including Guinness. The Lahtis called Fran O'Brien's "comfortable with an accommodating waitstaff."

Weekdays, there's an active lunch crowd from the Chrysler Tech Center and GM Truck and Bus located nearby. On weekends, it is not unusual for 180 dinners to be ordered from the kitchen, run by Chef Scott Dunham. Event days at Meadow Brook, the Palace and the Silverdome also bring a host of loyal patrons.

The 27-year-old Dunham, who lives in Rochester, is impressively trained with an associate's degree from the prestigious Rhode Island culinary school Johnson & Wales. Additionally,

Fran O'Brien's Maryland Crab House

Where: 621 South Opdyke, Auburn Hills, (248) 332-7744.
Hours: Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.; Friday 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; Dinner only Saturday 3-11 p.m. and Sunday 3-9:30 p.m.
Menu: Seafood tavern specializing in shellfish. For "landlubbers" there are steaks, burgers and chicken selections. Many items kids like.
Cost: Raw bar & appetizers \$5-13; crab specialties \$17-30; surf and turf combos \$17-30; seafood/fish sandwiches \$7-8.
Reservations: for six or more.
Credit cards: all majors except Discover and Diners.

he has earned a bachelor's degree in hospitality management from Miami's Florida International University. "I find cooking both challenging and creative," he said. "I also like working with people in the kitchen. Because I'm a native of New York state and have studied

in both New England and Florida, I understand the regional differences of seafood up and down the East Coast. Maine to Florida is like night and day."

Traditional East Coast cooking is in the spotlight with crab cakes, soft shell crabs and Maryland spiced crab soup. But it's the Maryland Blue Crabs in season from the end of April through September, that are the house specialty. Fran O'Brien's may be the only Michigan restaurant serving them. Blue Crab season is partially interrupted by soft shell crabs from mid-May to the end of June. But you haven't missed them. Dunskey contends that frozen soft shell crabs are "very close to fresh." For fresh oysters, he also dismisses the only-eat-oysters-in-months-with-32-theory "Chesapeake Bay oysters are the only kind we serve," he said. "They are excellent year-round."

Truly East Coast traditional is fried Ipswich whole clams \$18. The operative word here is "whole" translated as with the belly—that's Eastern, Cape Cod and delicious. If you're thinking Howard Johnson's style, these are not. Ask the waitperson for a fuller explanation if you're unsure.

But if you can't decide what to order, Fran's Favorite \$19 is a sampler plate with one soft shell crab, one crab cake and a piece of Crab Imperial (back fin crab meat, mixed with herbs and spices, then baked golden brown).

Dunham's signature dish is Coconut Shrimp \$8, coconut-battered jumbo shrimp, deep fried and dipped in warm honey. Forget dessert items; Keep with



STAFF PHOTO BY JIMMY STROMBERG

Cracking-up: Scott Dunham (left to right), Dan Dunskey and Drew Dunskey take a crack at Blue Crabs, Blue Point Oysters and fries at Fran O'Brien's Maryland Crab House.

the theme and order these shrimp instead!

Dunskey cited other menu favorites. From the raw bar, it's oysters on the half shell \$7 per half-dozen and smoked salmon \$8. Calamari \$7 fried golden brown, tossed with casino butter and spices is a popular appetizer along with crab cakes \$7 or fried

soft shell crab \$7 served with mustard sauce and cole slaw. Maryland Spiced Crab Soup \$3.25 is tomato-base zesty and Old Bay spice flavorful.

Dunskey is a tequila aficionado. The bar menu has no less than 14 different Margaritas. The variety comes from multiple brands and styles of tequila.

And the name? Fran O'Brien is a former Michigan State University and Washington Redskins football player and friend of Dunskey's silent partner. Both the name and concept are spin-offs from an eatery with the same name in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea, Florida.

RESTAURANT SPECIALS

Restaurant Specials feature theme dinners, menu changes and restaurant openings. Send news items to: Keely Wygonik, Entertainment Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, or fax them to (313) 691-7279.

ANN ART FAIR BEER GARDEN

Wednesday, July 16 to Saturday, July 19 at the Michigan Theatre, 603 E. Liberty, across from Borders Books & Music, in the middle of the State Street Art Fair in Ann Arbor. The beer garden, an air conditioned escape from the noise of the streets, will feature cold beer, fresh bratwurst, Stuechi's ice cream, cold drinks, pop corn and more. Hours are 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, July 16-18; 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

EXCALIBUR

Excalibur Restaurant, 28875 Franklin Road, Southfield is offering a dinner special for two all month long. Canadian Baby Back Ribs will be only \$19.97 Monday through Thursday the entire month of July. Call (248) 358-3355 for details.

GOLDEN MUSHROOM

Reid Ashton, president of the Golden Mushroom, 18100 W. 10 Mile Road, Southfield, has named Derin Moore as Executive Chef. Moore replaces Steven Allen who resigned to open a new restaurant in Novi. Prior to joining the Golden

Mushroom, Moore served as Executive Chef of the Bay Harbor Yacht Club. Previously, he spent eight years at Pike Street Restaurant in Pontiac. Beginning in 1991, he spent five years at Pike Street as Executive Chef and also served as Sous Chef, Night Chef and Banquet Catering Chef at Pike Street from 1988 to 1991. A member of the 1996 Culinary Team U.S.A., Moore has also served as a substitute chef instructor at Oakland Community College and Schoolcraft College. He has participated in numerous national and international exhibitions and competitions, including the Culinary Olympics, the Michigan Pork Producers Culinary Competition (1993), the Chicago Culinary Exposition (1991) and the Detroit Culinary Salon. This July marks the Golden Mushroom's 25th anniversary.

MAX AND ERMA'S

Max and Erma's Restaurant, Bar and Gathering Place recently launched its 1997 World Tour summer promotion. Continuing through Labor Day, the promotion includes limited edition T-shirts, a summer menu insert which features new entrees and beverages and a "What-I-Did-On-My-Summer-Vacation" photo contest.

SAINT LOUIS BREAD

New bakery-cafe, 27651 Southfield Road (between 11 Mile and 12 Mile Road) Lathrup Village, offers more than a dozen

varieties of fresh-baked bread, bagels, fruit-filled croissants, cinnamon rolls, muffins, hot and cold specialty drinks, made-to-order sandwiches, soups and salads. Hours are 6:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Saturday; 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday. (248) 443-0282 or fax (248) 443-0270.

STILLWATER GRILL

Opened Saturday, June 7 in the heart of downtown Brighton on Grand River, one mile south of the I-96 expressway, overlooking the Millpond Lake. The decor and theme is based upon a resort in the Big Sky Country of Montana named Stillwater. Entrees include six different hand-cut steaks, pork chops, prime rib, fresh seafood, pastas, Maryland crab cakes, Gulf Coast fried shrimp, barbecued ribs, chicken and salads. Hours are 4-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 4-11 p.m. Friday; 3-11 p.m. Saturday; and 3-10 p.m. Sunday. Call (810) 225-1800 for information, reservations.

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