

DINING

Big Rock dishes out chop house menu with style

BY ELEANOR & RAY HEALD
SPECIAL WRITERS

Quintessential area restaurateurs Norman and Bonnie LoPage with their business partners Ray and Mary Nicholson have not rested on their successes with Point Creek Cider Mill Restaurant in Rochester, Mac and Ray's on Anchor Bay in Harrison Township or the Eastside Mario's locations. They continue to push the envelope creating now at "Big Rock" a modern, eclectic, energy-driven dining experience entering to a variety of moods.

If you've been to Jackson Hole, Wyoming or just favor an Up North lodge feel, then the main dining room with full menu and high-backed wooden booth seating should fit the bill. The large bar of the former Norm's will be familiar to regulars, but there's a new twist — five signature beers on tap, brewed on premise in the brew house adjoining the restaurant.

Brewmaster Dean Jones has put the custom-designed, state-of-the-art brewing equipment to the test and has winning combinations in Weizenheimer Hefe Weizen, served unfiltered with a lemon wedge, if desired. Then there's the strikingly red Raymond El Rojo, with color and flavor from caramel malt. Creamy, smooth and chocolatey Flying Buffalo Stout has a head that lasts to the bottom of the glass and Norm's Raggedy Ass Ale is a pale ale with true English style. The specialty seasonal draft is Scotch Ale with an earthy, smoky character. Jones is a two-time winner with this latter brew at

both the 1992 and 1994 Great American Beer Festival in Denver.

Beer is served as sampler-size, 2-ounce, half pint or British Imperial pint, 20-ounce, rather than our standard 16 ounces.

Menu selections are capably executed by Executive Chef Randy Smith, formerly Executive Chef at the Country Club of Jackson and sous chef at the Golden Mushroom under Chef Milos. He was a medal winner on the Michigan Culinary Team in 1992 and 1996. Ably assisted by his sous chef Scott Peterson, formerly of the Saw Tooth Club in Sun Valley, Idaho, Chef Randy oversees a kitchen staff of 60.

Menu choices are broad with 10 starters and five salads to kick things off. Chop House Favorites number 16 and range from a 10-ounce chopped sirloin burger or marinated chicken on an onion roll to aged beef cuts weighing 12 to 32 ounces and priced \$15 to \$35. These are complemented by potato-wrapped salmon \$22 and broiled Canadian whitefish \$17 plus a catch of the day at market price.

Portions are generously oversized and come with a vegetable garnish. A number of sides \$4-7, especially one of the potato selections, make a good accompaniment for any steak or chop offering. There's no plate charge for sharing.

Feeling rich? Want to feel rich? You are rich? Then head straight to Got Rocks; the second level, cigar-friendly champagne and caviar bar. Leather sofas and oversized chairs with lush fabrics speak the comfort and

Big Rock Chop & Brew House

Where: 245 S. Eton, Birmingham (248) 647-7774.

Hours: Monday through Saturday 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. and Sunday 3-10 p.m.

Menu: Hand-cut, aged steaks and chops plus innovative chicken and fish dishes. On the lighter side, there's pizza, salads, sandwiches and burgers.

Cost: Starters and salads \$4-12; chop house favorites \$15-29; sandwiches and pizzas \$6-10.

Reservations: Main dining room only.

Credit cards: All majors accepted.

luxury of a private club. A grazing menu with tableside preparations of items such as Shrimp Saigon, Steak Diane, Steak Tartare or Oriental Potstickers are masterfully prepared by Maitre d' Lew Weidemann and his staff. Weidemann rejoins the LoPages who lured him from Chicago when they orchestrated the opening of Birmingham's Townsend Hotel nine years ago. Got Rocks has its own bar and another of Jones' specialty brews, Beer, cook conditioned and hand pulled only at this bar.

In the remaining warm weather weeks, patio dining is an available choice with a streamlined menu of grilled items and sandwiches for eating on the lighter side.

For wine aficionados, Weidemann also oversees Boulder

Wine Cellar on the lowest level. Together with General Manager Vera Rizer, Weidemann has drawn up an ambitious wine list with 23 Champagnes, six California sparklers and well over 100 domestic wines from California, Washington and Oregon. Selections from this list are available in all dining venues. French wine lovers will be able to select from a "captain's list" being developed.

Norm and Bonnie LoPage have reinvented themselves at Big Rock.

"After being in the restaurant business since 1973, we wanted to include all the things that please us in this restaurant," Bonnie maintained. "Big Rock has been on the idea board for three to four years." Norm added. "We know we wanted to change. It's healthy to shake up your energy. If you stop reinventing, creative juices cease to flow. We kept a log of our ideas that came from reading, travel and going to restaurants in major cities like New York."

And if anything, Big Rock has a modern New York style that is a throwback to old fashions becoming new again. "People are consuming less volume and going for quality," Bonnie said. "The restaurant business today is also show business."

The "old fashions becoming new again" is played out well in the mood set by background music. You can listen to anything from N' King Cole to upbeat contemporary in the main dining room. But in Got



STAFF PHOTO BY JERRY ZOLNERT

New York style: Here's an overview of the dining room at Big Rock Chop and Brew House, the remodeled, restyled and renamed former Norm's Eton Street Station.

Rocks, it's the 1940s in your ear.

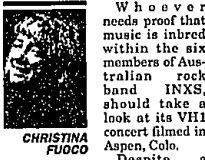
Design architect for the remodeling was Mike Jones and interior decorations were created by Joy Walker, both of Roger Sherman Partners in Dearborn. If you don't say "New York" when you walk in the entrance, you've not been there, done that. But

that's OK, you need go no further than Birmingham to experience it.

Main dining is white table cloth, but the ambience is casually elegant. Got Rocks is comfortably luxurious. Show biz? We'd say showmanship, lively and dynamic.

STREET SCENE

INXS keeps trademark sound in new album



CHRISTINA FUCIO

Whoever needs proof that music is inbred within the six members of Australian rock band INXS, should take a look at its VH1 concert filmed in Aspen, Colo.

Despite a three-year absence from the stage, INXS didn't miss a beat playing songs culled from its 10-year history including those from its latest release "Elegantly Wasted" (Mercury).

"It did turn out pretty good, didn't it?" lead singer Michael Hutchence said during a phone conversation from Los Angeles. "We were dying to play. The adrenaline was running. I guess it all helps."

INXS has been visibly absent from the music scene, but the time off was by no means a vacation, explained Hutchence whose band headlined radio station WFLA's "PlanetFest" on Saturday, Aug. 23.

"We took quite a few years off not because we were sitting around doing nothing but our manager and ourselves, we'd been together many years, parted ways. He went back to Australia to manage his life, so to speak. We signed to Polygram/Mercury for the world, and we all did our own little solo projects," said Hutchence, whose band was formerly signed to Atlantic Records.

The lanky singer put his as-of-yet-unnamed solo album on hold until next year so as not to interfere with the release of "Elegantly Wasted."

"INXS comes first," he said

adding it was strange to perform solo.

"It was pretty difficult at first. You get so used to people saying certain things. It's (INXS) like a gang really, isn't it? And then with the solo project, you're not responsible to anyone but yourself. You don't have to worry about instrumentation."

Hutchence and girlfriend, Paula Yates, the ex-wife of Bob Geldof, also produced a daughter, Heavenly Hiranai Tiger Lily, during the break.

"Elegantly Wasted," the band's 10th studio album, was recorded in nine months, a weekend here and a weekend there, in several "hotel" rooms and "stuff," Hutchence explained.

"While we were writing songs, me and Andrew recorded everything. The writing went very well and we even managed to write lyrics much to our shock

and horror. Whenever we finished a song, we'd finish a song. We would sing it and we would keep the tape."

The album is trademark INXS. The first two tracks, the raging "Show Me (Cherry Baby)" and the pure pop of "Elegantly Wasted" have the self-assured swagger of the 1986 hit "What You Need" and 1990's "Suicide Blonde." "Everything" brings forth memories of "Disappear," from 1990's "X" album.

"We drew on many aspects of a sound we created," keyboardist/guitarist Andrew Farries said in a statement to the press. "Some of it could be us 12, 13 years ago. Now fashion-wise, trend-wise, that might be an insane thing to say. On the other hand, to keep changing just because you think you have to is not necessarily a good thing."

One thing that's new for INXS is it has taken on the monumental task of actively promoting "Elegantly Wasted" by making itself accessible to radio, television, and print journalists. Hutchence wasn't quite sure why he and his band have decided to do it but he's "having a good time."

"It's the biggest promotion we've ever done. We really traveled the world doing a million radio stations and interviews. We've been away for a long time.

Thank God everyone remembers us."

The Verve Pipe has been added to a distinguished list of musicians that includes Stone Temple Pilots singer Scott Weiland who is contributing songs to the Gwyneth Paltrow/Ethan Hawke film "Great Expectations," a modern twist on the classic story.

Last week the East Lansing alternative rock band went into the studio with their A&R representative/producer Brian Malouf to record the song "Her Ornament" for the film.

"They asked Brian (Vander Ark, The Verve Pipe's singer/songwriter) to write a song for the movie. They wanted a Rolling Stones-ish kind of feel to it. We took that idea and then we turned it into this rockabilly song. It turned out really well," said keyboardist/percussionist Doug Corella.

Verve Pipe fans will be able to see the band perform its first Detroit-area show since last December on Saturday, Aug. 30, at the Michigan State Fair. Following that date, The Verve Pipe will perform Tuesday, Sept. 23, at the Heritage Theatre in Saginaw, and Friday-Saturday, Sept. 26-27, at the Kalamazoo State Theatre. The band will then head to Hawaii and Australia.

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