Freshness of the product is important when serving fish, explains Muer as he tours the kitchen. (Staff photo by Harry Mauthe)

Checking the menu, Chuck Muer explains how his staff determines what selections are placed at the various restaurants (Staff photo)

Looking over a steaming pot of "Charlie's Chowder" is Muer and long-time employe Caroline. (Staff photo)

How keeping employes happy is an ingredient for success

By STEVE BARNABY

With a spring in his walk, Chuck Muer strides through his newest restaurant, the Farmington Hills "Clamdiggers."

The 38-year-old restauranteur has been working the restaurant circuit for 10 years since dumping his job at IBM to open his first restaurant, the Top O' the Pontch, in downtown Detroit.

Muer decided to open a business in the Hills after Charley's Crab at Pine Lake burned down last year.

He talks of his nine-restaurant business with pride, giving much credit to the staffs of the eateries. The Hills restaurant has approximately 85 employes to serve area residents.

"Many of the same people have been with us for years," he says, as he walks through restaurant addressing most of the employes by their first names.

"THE EMPLOYES ARE the backbone of the business. They are the real entrepreneurs. There are a succession of managers, but the employes will always be here," he says.

More than a quarter of a million dollars have been spent by Muer to transform the former Danny's Gin Mill. The 7,068 square foot restaurant seats 225 persons for dining, 46 in the lounge and bar and 16 around a four sided piano bar.

In the Muer corporation, employes participate in a profit-sharing program and also are stockholders in the company.

"Each restaurant is an entity unto itself, although they are owned by the Muer corporation. This is their (employes') restaurant," he says.

Muer says the success of involving employes in the business is demonstrated through the corporation's rising fortunes while the economy, in general, has been suffering.

Employes go through a five-day training period before a new restaurant opens. Newly hired employes participate in a two-week training course.

"The employes go through every department and they learn about marketing theory. After passing a written exam, they are shadowed by experienced waitresses until they are broken in," he says. Waitresses earn as much as $10 a night in tips, alone.

MUER BELIEVES that a restaurant should be part of the community, offering a spot where persons can relax and even meet new faces. He becomes animated when talking about his ideas.

"You see that table there," he says, pointing to a large wooden table with 10 persons seated at it.

"One of these days I'm going to put one of these tables at the front of the restaurant where people can come in and sit with other persons they don't know. I've seen it done in other restaurants and it's a good idea," he says.

Muer likes to bat around ideas and says he encourages employes to make suggestions. Putting together a menu for a new restaurant is one of the ways employes get to have input.

"We get together and brainstorm. It's a continual process of upgrading the menu, finding out what people like to eat," he says.

In addition to traditional seafood offerings and steaks, the Clamdiggers menu offers a rack of lamb with herb seasoning. The seafood is flown in daily from Boston.

The restaurant also features a raw seafood bar offering fresh Chatham Oysters, Cherrystone Clams and shrimp. The restaurant also has a salad bar.

Decorated in a nautical theme, the wood is stained natural. A feel of old-shore restaurant and bar room is created with oiled natural wood flooring, antique lighting and classic paintings of nudes, such as Goya's "Nude Maja" and Renoir's "The Bather."

"Restaurants are living things full of people who want more going for them than a 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. job," he says.

One of those persons is Clamdiggers Manager Jim MacDonald, who previously was manager of Charley's Crab. For a time he left the corporation to share ownership in a restaurant in Southfield, but came back to Muer's.

"We're getting a lot of customers from Bloomfield, Southfield and Brighton. We even have customers who come from Lansing," says MacDonald.

THE ENERGETIC MUER says he is continually thinking of new ideas for restaurants and presently is thinking of accenting an establishment toward a family tavern theme.

During his off-time Muer flies kites. He engenders it with as much enthusiasm as he does when running restaurants.

"The trouble with flying kites when you're young is that you don't have a long attention span. I started flying kites about 10 years ago when my kids were young," he says.

Spreading out a napkin on the table he demonstrates how a kite was constructed to fly off the back of a cruise ship in the Caribbean. The traditional kite, he says, collapsed because of the intense winds. A hole in the middle solved that problem.

Those old dream machines are treats for nostalgics

By CRAIG PIECHURA

The American convertible is all but extinct. Tail pipes have given way to strange sounding contraptions called catalytic converters.

And, in compliance with safety regulations, decorative hood ornaments must not be pointed in the shape of a swan lest they goose a pedestrian.

Has the American love affair with the automobile gone sour?

Not on the corner of Grand River and Seven Mile in Redford Township where the new Classic Auto Inc. museum-showroom stands.

Under one roof, the public and the car collector can witness a 50 year span of the American dream machine. Start with the 1910 four-cylinder Cadillac with its gas lanterns and wind up looking through the transparent green roof of the 1955 futuristic Crown Victoria Ford Sunliner.

THE BUILDING opened for business this week. If you bring in $25,000 you could drive home in a certified "full classic" 1933 Auburn touring car ("financing is available"). Or, if that's out of your price range and you're a student, you can pay 50 cents admission to the museum-showroom and get the grand tour by Mort Feldman, of Southfield, a man who knows his automobiles.

Feldman is the director of the sales and museum end of Classic Auto Restoration, an expanding company headquartered in Farmington.

On the tour of the showroom, Feldman points out some of the highlights of the collection.

"This is a 1929 Ford Model A convertible pickup truck," explains Feldman, "which is the exact style of the truck used on 'The Walton's.'" And for $6,500 you can pretend you're John-Boy at a drive-in movie.

Fans of "The Untouchables" and Edward G. Robinson will thrill to the 1930 Buick gangsterline with window shades in the rear which allow Frank Nitty to pull the shade and take a hit of hooch without attracting the heat. The upholstery in the Buick is grey mohair.

THE 1910 Cadillac in the showroom was the first car to ever feature a magneto starter, for all you technology afficianados. A '33 Ford in the museum introduced the mass-produced unheard-of eight cylinder engine. And the '55 Dodge was the first car to carry a monstrous hemi-eight engine behind its catfish chrome jaws.

If you're yearning for the days when you fumbled with Doris in the back of a rumble seat, the museum will evoke fond memories. The 1933 Ford coupe with a leaping greyhound on its hood and a rumble seat in the rear is one of the most impressive vehicles in the show. It carries a $7,950 price tag.

One row of cars against the wall in the museum features a line-up of one of the most popular cars of the century—the Model A Ford.

"The Model A itself would have to be one of the most popular of all antique cars," said Feldman. "It was probably the most problem-free car ever built. It is still very easy to get replacement parts for the Model A and almost anyone with any mechanical ability can keep the car tuned up."

BLAINE MARSTON, 25, of Livonia, is an employe at the showroom-museum and he tells people interested in restoring antique cars to start with a Model A.

Marston started restoring a 1930 Model A two-door sedan 12 years ago and just recently finished it to showroom quality. The car he worked on for 13 years now sits in the museum waiting for a buyer. Marston is presently looking for an early '30's Cadillac roadster to restore.

The major nemesis to the antique car buff is rust.

Feldman says the finest cars come from low-humidity states such as Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.

"Rust is like cancer," said Feldman. "You have to completely cure it or it will come through again. The finest way to cure rust is to sandblast it away."

WHILE SOME car collectors keep their cars under wraps, others proudly, but carefully, drive them on the road.

"It's called show and go," said Feldman. "But people in Michigan have to very careful not to drive when there is salt on the road. Even if the road is dry, in winter there is salt on the road."

The solution for some people who wish to drive a classic looking car on the road is to drive a replica.

Two such cars are offered for sale at Classic Auto Inc.—one is a replica of a 1936 Cord and the other is a copy of a 1930 Ford Sport Phaeton. Both cars feature air conditioning, power steering and automatic transmission. The Ford Phaeton replica was built by Classic in 1973 and the Cord copy was built by Samco in 1970.

Unlike many used car showrooms, Feldman does not write the price of the car on the windshield with poster paint alongside slogans like "Real Clean." That could be because it would be hard to fit six digits on the old small windshields.

But while the '29 Ford Model A carries a $12,500 price tag, and has earned six antique car trophies, the 1955 Dodge is bargain priced at $1,850 and worth more every year.

Recent years have not been glamour years in the American car industry, according to Feldman.

"To a great extent we have seen American cars become drab and stereotyped," says Feldman. "Imports have become so successful because they still carry some pizzazz with them. But it looks like American stylists finally have awakened to the problem and are working diligently to bring back pizzazz. Look at the AMC Pacer, there is a car that has great styling and is safe."

Mort Feldman, museum director and used car salesman, sits on the mohair seat of the 1930 Buick gangster's delight.