

RESTAURANT ROW HISTORY



Ask anyone in the Greater Chicago area, particularly on the North Shore or in the northwest suburbs, and they will immediately associate Wheeling with great restaurants, and the village's famed Restaurant Row, in particular.

Hot spots like Bob Chinn's Crabhouse, Tuscany, Superdawg, Benihana, Pete Miller's and Cooper's Hawk continue to attract enthusiastic diners, just as their predecessors have fed and entertained area residents and travelers for well over a century.

"The finest dining in the northern suburbs is found on Wheeling's Restaurant Row along the west banks of the Des Plaines River. This stretch of Milwaukee Avenue is home to some of the best-known restaurants in the Chicago area and is the dining destination for connoisseurs to sample cuisine delights from around the world," Wheeling proclaims in its dining guide.

The first tavern in Wheeling was built by Joseph Filkins in 1837, according to "Wheeling Through the Years," edited by Barbara McIntyre and Robert McIntyre in 1987.

"Milwaukee Avenue had become a stage route and post road and it was to provide travelers with food, drink and lodging that Filkins' Stage Coach Tavern was built on the northwest corner of what is now Milwaukee Avenue and Dundee Road," they wrote. "When Filkins rang the dinner bell, his customers rushed from the washing trough to the table to eat all they could hold for 25 cents. Whiskey was five cents extra."

The Filkins Tavern stood where Walgreen's stands today.

Many other taverns and hotels followed because those traveling from Chicago to Milwaukee by coach or wagon could reach Wheeling by lunch time, so places sprung up that could feed hungry travelers, according to Patti Steilen, curator of the Wheeling Historical Society. Filkins' was followed by places like Chicago House, Wheeling House, Behm's Riverside Inn, the Union Hotel, Moellers' Restaurant and many more.

In the early years, restaurants were Wheeling's "industry," providing employment for many of the residents. Lorraine Haben was quoted in "Through the Years" as saying, "there wasn't much work for you young people. You were a waitress or you went somewhere else."

"In the 1920s when the automobile really became popular, Wheeling boomed

and was one of the best-known chicken and steak dinner centers in the Chicago area," Marshall Balling, grandson of the owner of the Chicago House, said in "Through The Years."

That was also the time when The Mob found Wheeling. They frequented places like The Derby speakeasy, the Bon Air Country Club (now Chevy Chase) and both Kay's Tavern and Villa Venice, which were nearby in Northbrook (where River Road and Milwaukee Avenue meet). Prohibition was the law then and bootleggers (as well as bookies) flocked to Wheeling area roadhouses from 1920 until the law was repealed in 1933.

The end of Prohibition led to another boom in the Wheeling restaurant business. For instance, Fred and Frances Moeller opened Moeller's restaurant in an old house in 1935 and Otto Orłowski opened Polish Village in 1937. Behm's Riverside Inn was also very popular at this time. For instance, famed vaudeville, movie, stage and television star Don Ameche, who lived in Deerfield, was a regular.

Later, during World War II, fantastic fish fry dinners were reportedly held at the Union Hotel. People would wait in line for hours on Friday nights. Sounds like an old-time, much stripped-down version of the modern Bob Chinn's!

In recent times, these pioneering restaurants have been replaced with some establishments that have come and gone, and others that remain and thrive. Behm's was eventually replaced by Hackney's Restaurant which has more recently been replaced by D'Agostino's Pizza. Don Roth's Blackhawk came to Wheeling in 1969 and was a huge draw for 40 years until the family chose to close it in 2009. Moeller's was replaced by La Francaise, which closed in 2007 and is currently waiting for a new tenant.

Bob Chinn's Crabhouse opened in late 1982 and is currently the fifth grossing independent restaurant in the country. Superdawg opened a huge hot dog drive-in along Restaurant Row in 2010 and others also continue to flock there to take advantage of the area's huge following.

There are currently 23 full-service restaurants currently located along Milwaukee Avenue between Hintz and Lake-Cook Roads, the official boundaries of Restaurant Row, according to John Melaniphy, Wheeling's

Director of Economic Development. They collectively brought in \$96 million in revenue during 2015, a 6.25 percent increase over 2014.

