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Grille serves a neighborhood clientele

By E. Thomas Wood

Many people may dream of owning their own down-home neighborhood tavern someday. When the Sportsman's Grille opened in October 1985, Jerry and Jim Chandler made that dream a reality.

Since then, the popular Harding Road restaurant has developed a faithful, yet diverse following which is spelling success for the Chandler brothers.

It's the kind of place that patrons can feel equally comfortable in either a three-piece suit or a pair of jeans.

At lunchtime, for example, it's not unusual to see a record company executive and a service-station mechanic seated next to each other at the bar, enjoying anything from a quick soup and sandwich to northern waldyked pike.

And on any given night, one may encounter a member of the Vanderbilt board of trust and his family at one table and a crowd of students at the next.

One thing's for certain — you'll always see a crowd.

For the owners, as is the case with many other successful small businessmen, the restaurant is a matter of pride.

Like a proud fisherman showing off his trophies, Jerry Chandler points out the furnishings and trinkets that he and his brother have gathered for the Grille.

Each has a story behind it.

"That plate above the kitchen door," Jerry, says as he gestures, "that's from Germany. When I saw it, I knew right away that I would use it whenever I had a



Jerry Chandler
Sportsman's Grille

Photo by Bill Thompson

bar." The mahogany bar dates from 1915; the wooden scabb, of indeterminate age and stocked with imported beers, came from Jerry's favorite pub in Evansville, Ind.

"That's beveled glass in the kitchen doors," growls Tugboat Jack Wheeler. "Can't find that anymore. Everything in here's old."

Tugboat Jack is the Sportsman's Grille's most valuable treasure. A veteran of the restaurant business around this area where highways 70 and 100 meet, Jack is responsible for the Grille's large and eclectic menu.

The "Tugboat" nickname came from his stories of life on a Mississippi riverboat in the old days, and Jack's Delta influences are reflected in his weekly Cajun specials with gumbo and his red beans and rice.

Other specialties include barbecue, Italian dishes, catfish and frog legs.

And then there's Jack's legendary cornbread. "I won't tell anybody how I make that," he says, dead serious but with a twinkle in his eye.

When the brothers decided to diversify their enterprises, which include Melrose Billiards (a poolhall dating from 1942) and Chandler Brothers Amusement Company by opening the Grille, they immediately sought out Jack. They were familiar with his cooking from his days when he was at Doug's Pub (nearly on Page Road where the Dunham's Station restaurant is now located).

"I want quality in the food here," says Jerry, "so we cut our own French fries, and little things like that." The quality of the atmosphere was enhanced not long

ago when the Grille obtained a liquor license. "We found that the ladies wanted to be able to have a glass of wine," the proprietor says. "So far, we've been able to do these things and still keep prices down."

Not all of the crowd is drawn by the food's quality, prices and the old-fashioned hunting-lodge ambience of the place.

The Grille takes advantage of high-tech as well, with a television satellite dish beaming in a crowd of his fellow regionally televised basketball, football or baseball games, or even a World Cup soccer match from Brazil now and again.

Jerry, a Michigan State grad and something of a Big Ten expert, finds that the dish draws a crowd of his fellow northern expatriates in search of conference games not shown on Nashville television.

The Grille's various selling points have helped it to succeed in a location that had become something of a graveyard for eateries. Originally a Burger Chef, the building stood vacant more often than not for several years. Its location at the junction of the highways makes it difficult to approach from town. But then, it's often the case that the finest eateries are the hardest to get to.

So the question must be posed to Jerry Chandler: Is there any particular secret to his and his brother's success in this risk-laden industry?

Jerry doesn't have a chance to answer. "Personality, son. Personality," pontificates Tugboat Jack, taking a gulp of his Budweiser for emphasis.

It's hard to argue.