

Bring a hearty appetite when you visit Grabbe's

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By BILL REINHARDT
Courier-Post Staff

Delores Achilles says her Grabbe's Seafood restaurant is "kind of unique."

That's somewhat like saying Disney World is "a nice place to visit."

One glimpse of the Westville eatery that originally was founded just after Prohibition in 1933 and the mental calendar begins to flip pages backward. It's 1950 again: Lead stories on the nightly news might be that "Cinderella" debuts in theaters; CBS starts broadcasting TV signals in color; and 45 RPM records now are available.

In the case of Grabbe's, deem old-fashioned to mean casual, enjoyable and plain fun. Older floors are squeaky clean and walls are gleaming wood, wood and more wood in the large spare room. Legs under dated tables are stainless steel tubing; think classic kitchenette. Grab a wooden booth and you're treated to sitting ramrod straight.

It's wonderful!

Apparently, other folks think so, too. "Lots of people want to sit in the booths," explains Achilles.

This out-of-the-ordinary ambience, complete with a jukebox that automatically plays every 20 minutes (we get country and western sounds along with our "Jeopardy!" and "Wheel of Fortune" on the TV), brings along a menu with prices that border on belonging to a few decades ago. There aren't many spots in South Jersey where customers can get a seafood combo for under \$14.

It shows in the final bill; we end up leaving just over \$63, not including a nifty tip for a very sociable server who also fills in as bartender and cook the Monday night we stop in.

As bartender, she serves up frosty cold Michelob draft beers (\$2). As cook, she provides cups of irresistible crab soup (\$2.95) that definitely pleases. The recipe handed down through the family calls for flavors of carrots and potatoes to mingle in the broth and a lot more crab than I anticipated.

We pair it with soft dinner rolls and large crab-shaped pats of butter straight from the fridge and hard, unfortunately.

Atmosphere like this makes me thirsty for suds and prompts me to want to eat with my hands.

Grabbe's provides the perfect scenario: mussels in red sauce (\$7.95). The mollusks normally are offered only in white sauce, but since we're virtually alone our accommodating eager-to-please server bends to my begging and uses the red gravy ordinarily served with pasta dishes. The mussels are small, yet tasty, and the sauce is thick and clotted, with hoards of garlic tidbits. Well, I did ask for it.

Far better are crab balls (\$5.95), breaded orbs of delicate crab that go so well with the establishment's tangy cocktail sauce or savory mayonnaise-y tartar sauce. The marquee deal of the menu may be the oyster fry, a half-dozen moist breaded bivalves for \$9. It's a full entree for lighter eaters

My date's garden salad fills the bill, a mix of greens, cukes and tomato. But it's fresh and crisp and the ranch dressing is passable.

You can get seafood any way you like it at Grabbe's -- as long as it's fried. The menu swears the eatery uses no-cholesterol trans fat free, plus the grease is changed



DOUGLAS M. BOVITT

Grabbe's Seafood Restaurant in Westville takes diners back to a time when life was simple and an evening out wouldn't break the bank.

REVIEW

Grabbe's Seafood 19 Delsea Drive Westville (856) 456-3594 www.crabs.net Cuisine: Seafood

Overall:

Food:

Ambience:

Value: 1/2

Service: 1/2

Price: Soup: \$2.95; salads: \$2.95; appetizers: \$3.95 to \$10.95; entrees: \$10.95 to \$14.95

Credit: VISA, MasterCard, Discover

Wheelchair: Accessible

Entertainment: No

Alcohol: Yes

Brunch: No

Late night: No

Outdoor dining: No

Parking: Adjacent lot, on street

Hours: Mondays, 4 to 11 p.m.; Tuesdays through Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; closed Sundays

Reservations: Yes

Recommended dishes: Grabbe's crab soup, garden salad, oyster fry appetizer, crab balls appetizer, fried scallops, seafood combo

What the stars mean: Five stars is excellent, four stars is very good, three stars is good, two stars is fair, one star is poor.

every 5,000 miles (just kidding, Mrs. Achilles). Those wishing for seafood prepared another way from the dinner list have only two choices: Cajun catfish (\$11.95) or whole lobster (market price).

True crab eaters -- you'll recognize them by the bits of crab shell in their eyebrows and pockets -- may be attracted to Grabbe's, where they can get blue claw, dungeness, snow crab or king crab, and they can get them steamed, garlic style or with butter. Or, you can hog out any night on an all-you-can-eat deal at \$22.95 for steamed crabs and \$25.95 for garlic crabs.

Since it would take me about a week and a half to get my money's worth that way, I stay in that "lots of food" frame of mind and go for a Grabbe's seafood combo (\$13.95).

First and foremost is the crabcake. Delores Achilles calls it "the best," made from a recipe handed down from her mother. It wears a crispy breading, yet it's moist and savory inside with more than enough snowy white crab meat.

Also on the dish are one tender scallop, one large butterflied shrimp and what might be one of the best pieces of fried flounder I've experienced, with fine texture and delicate flavor. I don't make a modest dent in a heap of pedestrian french fries.

My mate busies herself with a fried scallops meal (\$12.95), more than enough sweet, moist rounders of seafood with golden-brown coatings.

Dessert is an afterthought and that's a good thing since there is none. Still, it would be nice to have a wedge of pie with steaming coffee while appreciating the turn-back-the-clock ambience.

This is a spot to arrange a gathering of your best buds for grog and grub. Tell them to come casual and bring an appetite. The fare isn't upscale, but the time spent together might be. The kids? Bring 'em; there's a kid's menu.

Bill Reinhardt is a veteran restaurant critic. He has worked for the Courier-Post for 38 years and is currently an editor in the Features Department. Reach him at (856) 486-2439 or breinhardt@courierpostonline.com

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