



The Wicked Sister

CATHY HOWELL AND FAMILY TRANSFORMED A BAR, BOUGHT AT AUCTION, INTO ONE OF THE SAULT'S PREMIERE RESTAURANTS

Photos and Story by Phil Eich, Storyville Social, as part of the Michigan Main Street Story Series

My grandpa bought a bar called The Gin Mill at auction when he was 80 years old, and he renamed it The Farmer's Folly. He wasn't overly impressed with himself after he learned how much a kitchen was going to cost to put in, so he gave it to his three daughters, my mom and my two aunts, and they immediately hired me to be their general manager. It took a year to plan and renovate, and for everyone who talks about red tape and bureaucracy, we didn't really struggle with any of that. Everyone that we had to work with at the state and the city were really good to us and very accommodating, so that helped substantially.

We opened January 6, 2014. We didn't have a sign out front, we didn't have an address on our door, it was the middle of

winter, and we didn't have any parking—but we were packed. Maybe people were just really intrigued to see how we cleaned the place up or maybe it was just good karma, but it allowed us to be successful.

To be fair, I had done hostessing and bartending before becoming the general manager, but I had never worked in a kitchen. When we opened, I hardly had any of the answers, so I would just ask people, 'What would you do? What should we do?' I think it endeared the crew to hear 'We want to listen to what you have to say,' and it became something that made this place feel like it was for everybody. It became part of the culture here.

For example, two of the cooks, Tyler and Jared, were like, 'We

need a big, angry burger. Something BIG.' So we made a giant burger with cheese curds, Bourbon sauce, American cheese and bacon.

Then, while our core menu doesn't change, every six to eight weeks, our chef Kat comes up with a new six-item menu and just kills it. She went to culinary school and has a great wealth of information. She is a rock star. She got promoted to kitchen manager and executive chef when she was 22. I thought I knew what I was getting when I hired a 22-year-old kitchen manager and that is actually not true. Not only is she one of the most talented chefs in Michigan, but she's also one of the best leaders I've ever seen in restaurant operations. Someday she'll leave me, because she's only 25 and I can't imagine that she's going to retire here, but I keep telling her, 'Until you find a better opportunity, you are a gift.'

Eventually, my mom and aunts didn't love restaurant life or really running a business. But that was really all I've ever wanted to do, so I bought the bar from them on April 25th, 2015. I love the flexibility. If I want to run numbers, I can be the data geek that day. If I want to drink wine and chat with customers to share our story and build relationships, I can do that.

We're a big family here, and the community has stood by us through and through. We don't have parking, so in the wintertime, people are climbing snowbanks in -20 below to get here. That's not a whole lot of fun and yet we can still be packed, so we give back to the community as much as we can. We sponsor adult and



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youth sports teams. We do Battle of the Breweries every year and that goes to support hospice.

Originally, my mom and aunts wanted to call the place something like 'Gramps Pub.' But it wasn't a pub, and I didn't want to spend my days explaining to customers why we called it a pub when it wasn't, so I suggested the name 'The Wicked Sister.'

My dad said, 'Well, we should take turns guessing which one is the wicked one!' We all laughed, and the name stuck.

- Cathy Howell, The Wicked Sister, Sault Ste. Marie



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