

The Evolution of a Local Bar

The Grande Saloon is the Real Neighborhood Bar & Grill

By Joe Hawrylko



Owner Gerry Touhey stands in front of his landmark bar, the Grande Saloon, on Van Houten Ave.

Back when the Grande Saloon opened in 1974, Van Houten Ave. was an entirely different place. The Athenia neighborhood was dotted with dozens of popular bars and watering holes between Clifton Ave. and Third Ward Park in Passaic.

Years later, changing trends, smoking laws and added liabilities and costs have contributed to the decline of the local watering hole. Yet, the Grande Saloon has withstood the tests of time by evolving from the local drinking spot to neighborhood bar and grill, complete with an expansive menu and plenty of seating for both drinkers and diners.

“If you went back to the 70s and 80s, it was a drinking place. Now it’s totally different,” explained owner Gerry Touhey. “We had to evolve that way out of necessity. Unless you’re catering to college kids, it’s hard.

Our niche is to appeal to people that want to be in the neighborhood where they know other people.”

Gradually, the Saloon has transitioned from watering hole into bar and grill in order to better compete with other bars, as well as franchises like TGI Fridays, Applebee’s and Chevy’s.

“We try to give an authentic experience. Applebee’s, their tag line is “The neighborhood bar and grill,”” explained Touhey. “That’s just a term telling you what to think. We’re the real deal. We are the neighborhood bar and grill.”

The transformation has been in the making for a little more than a decade under the careful watch of Touhey’s old friend and former tavern owner John Blanos.

Together, they developed a diverse menu that now attracts large dinner crowds that regularly fill up the

Saloon's booths and tables across from the bar.

"He's a Clifton guy. He's owned bars before," said Touhey, who previously owned Fatso's for two years in the 70s before opening the Grande Saloon. "He helps me out because he's more of a foodie. He has helped me evolve the menu. It's constantly in transition. We go out ourselves and shop at Restaurant Depot to pick up a lot of our own stuff to get a better deal. It's hard to compete (with franchises) on food costs."

And while the expansive menu gives patrons a different reason to check out the Grande Saloon, Touhey said it is the service that makes them repeat customers.

"My philosophy is that we're in the hospitality business. Customers are our top priority," he said. "We want to keep our customers, so we make sure we provide their needs. Any place is only as good as the employees. We have good bartenders. Our manager (Blanos) has been in the business his whole life."

That dedication to service is why generations of customers still frequent the Grande Saloon.

"I joke with some customers saying, you're 40 years old, you better watch your behavior or I'll tell your mother and father," he laughed. "What I always liked about my own bar is that it is a good melting pot. There's construction guys at the bar and suit alongside suit and tie guys. It's not just a blue collar bar or a professional watering hole."

And while the dinner crowd has helped this business thrive over the past decade, Touhey admitted that he is continuing to look for ways to

improve. Both he and his manager have been working on getting more use out of the basement bar, which resembles an old English pub.

In the local bar heyday, both the upstairs and downstairs bars were open. Today, the basement is open for special events such as birthdays, repasses and the like.

Touhey also pays close attention to detail, and regularly reinvests in his bar. Recent upgrades have

replaced his floors, booths, tables and televisions.

"We have a good location here. We try to keep the place good looking," said Touhey. "I always thought we had the potential (to be more of a restaurant). We have a free standing building. The location and place is nice enough to pull it off. Some people, the noise at the bar puts them off, but most people like it. It's a very casual experience."