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Weber's Inn Reaches Milestone 80th Anniversary In Ann Arbor: A Look Back At Its History

By JORGE AVELLAN · MAR 13, 2017



[Weber's Inn](#), to many, is one of Washtenaw County's most iconic landmarks. 2017 marks its 80th anniversary. We sent WEMU's Jorge Avellan to find out how Weber's has made it through eight decades of business and why it's so special to many people.



Listening...

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WEMU's Jorge Avellan reports on the 80th anniversary of Weber's Inn in Ann Arbor.

"It's like you visit family. You know every corner of the place"

Hans Rauer describes how he feels when he walks into Weber's. He and his wife Marianne have been customers since 1960. They hosted their wedding reception at Weber's that year when the business was located at the previous Jackson Road site in [Scio Township](#) just north of Ann Arbor. The couple had recently arrived from Germany and got a warm welcome from Sonja Weber, one of the owners.

"We came to Mrs. Weber, and she was so gracious and helpful and she said, 'Marianne, don't worry about it, I will help you. Because I come from the same town. I will help you.' Because I had nobody here to arrange this reception. She picked out the menu, the wine, everything"

Weber's is celebrating its 80th anniversary this March. Ken Weber, who is now the president, shares how his father Herman got the business started.

"My father was a farmer in Chelsea, and he was farming chickens during the summer. He'd take the streetcar from Chelsea to Ann Arbor to sell his chickens to Walter Metzger from [Metzger's Restaurant](#) downtown and then it was the end of the season, he didn't have any more chickens and told him, 'This is going to be my last delivery.' So Mr. Metzger said, 'Would you like a job for the winter?' And Dad said yes, and he ended up renting a space above the restaurant and was a dishwasher in the kitchen and that's how he got his first taste of the restaurant business."

From that job, Herman saved enough money to buy a car, but, instead, invested the funds to run the High Speed Inn located at Washtenaw and Platt Road in Ann Arbor. It was 1937, and Herman was only 23 years old. He operated the business with his brother who later moved away. It consisted of a grill, a few tables, and a juke box that helped pay the rent. That venture led to him moving on to other projects, such as the Weber's location where Hans and Marianne got married and later to the current location on Jackson Road.

"Hi everyone. Most of you know me. I'm Laura. Thank you for coming to Weber's and did you want to let me know when you are ready to order?"

For decades, customers have flocked to Weber's for their [favorite dishes](#), like the London Broil and the crab cakes, but the top seller is the prime rib that's been served since the 1950's.

Executive chef [Jeremy Caroen](#) sizzles prime rib in the kitchen.

"So we go through about 60,000 pounds."

That's how much of it they cook a year.

Vice president and general manager Michael Weber joins us in the kitchen where the behind-the-scenes action takes place.

"It's a very large kitchen. We have the front line--just serves the restaurant. We have a backline--that's for prep. And that's for the bar area. And then we have a large banquet kitchen that we're in right now. On Saturday night, we can serve 500 people for dinner in the restaurant and then have a 200-person wedding downstairs and a 200-person holiday party."

Michael and I continue walking through the kitchen, and I quickly realize this employee area has doors everywhere. You could easily get lost if you don't know where you're going.

"It's all kind of connected. There is a lot of different labyrinth stairwells that bring you to the same places. It's massive though. And it has a very large service quarters. It is so you can get everything done. We just went through the kitchen, now we're in the banquet hallway, which is connected to the banquet pool area, the grand ballroom, and that's connected to the housekeeping and laundry station that we are walking into right now."

That's where we come across Pamela Barnett and Linda Griffith from the hotel's housekeeping. They both have been working there since the early 1970's. Linda reminds Michael about Ken Weber's birthday coming up.

"In March. Oh, I almost forgot about that. Your dad's birthday? Yes. Linda knows my dad's birthday better than I do so that's why we rely on her. Do you know how old he is going to be? Sixty-one or sixty-two? Do you know Pam? Yes, he'll be sixty-two. He's one year younger than me. Thank you Linda for the birthday and Pam for letting me know how old my own dad is. What would I do without you two? Thanks."

Back at the restaurant, Brian Weber, Ken's other son, who is also vice president of the establishment, tells me he's been reflecting on the last few decades of

design inspirations in the main dining room. The goal is to give it a 1960's feel.

"I'm currently going through all the art work. There's been probably ten, twelve different pieces that have been purchased 1980's, 1990's that don't really fit in that old school theme. I'm removing those and getting art replicated to fill the spot. We're bringing back the old black beadboards, crème walls, and brass fixtures."

Brian says they like to update the menu from time to time, but they avoid getting rid of favorites like the prime rib. But as much as they want to keep all of them on the menu, some are no longer listed.

"There's actually a good story about an item that we've had forever. It's called the Coconut Snowball and we've probably had that recipe since the sixties. And its vanilla ice-cream, rolled toasted coconut on top of hot fudge with whipped cream with cherry on top. And we wanted to make room for a new dessert that Marybeth wanted to try out, so we took it off the menu. But when we did that, we trained all the staff to let our old time guests know that we still have the Snowball. It's not on the menu, but if you want the Coconut Snowball, we will make it for you. We'll never really lose that recipe."

Michael Weber says it's those kinds of decisions that have helped them stay open for 80 years.

"We don't have a corporate vice president in some office halfway across the country. We're here every day, so we run the business more on the feedback we get from the guests and the quality that we feel day in and day out, and the feedback that we get from our employees, and not from a spreadsheet from an office in another state."

The 158-guest room hotel on the property has also helped bring in customers. It's a lot different than the six-room motel Herman Weber started off with in the 1950's. Throughout the years, the hotel and restaurant have had many celebrity guests. There's a Wall of Fame in the basement with photographs that are signed by some of them. Ken Weber names some of the celebrities.

"Here was when Louis Armstrong was here. Remember Jimmy Durante? He was here back in the day and it was amazing when this guy came. I wasn't here, my parents saw him. And of course, [KFC](#), Colonel Sanders, the King of Chicken back in the sixties when he was here. So what did he eat? Do you remember? I don't know what he had. Was it chicken? I would doubt it."

It seems like everyone who works at Weber's has a good story to tell, but there is

one that describes the kind of employer employee relationship that is the glue to this iconic family owned business. It's about Herman Weber, as told by restaurant general manager Cathy Dillman.

"He said, when he was a dishwasher, basically no one spoke to him because he was a dishwasher and then he said when he became a restaurant owner everybody talked to him. So he made it a point, the first person he would talk to in the restaurant were his dishwashers."

So what's next for Weber's? It's more of the same; they plan to remain independent to continue serving the community that has helped them succeed for more than three-quarters of a century.