

JACK LIVES HERE

The Grill House offers more spirits than just those behind the bar

Allegan's Grill House is home to great food, great drinks, and "Jack," the resident ghost.



Marcia Wagner's eyes sparkle when she talks about Jack. "It's fun to have a resident ghost. Although I wouldn't exactly call him a tourist attraction, he does make life here a little more interesting."

"Jack" is the nickname given to the legendary ghost of a lumberjack who was killed in a bar room knife fight in 1847 at the Hubbard House, a former stagecoach stop and boarding house for local lumberjacks. Marcia and her husband, Dan, bought the place about 10 years ago and renamed it the Grill House.

It turns out they may have gotten more than they bargained for. Marcia recited a litany of out-of-the-ordinary things attributed to Jack: "Glasses fall off the bar when no one is around. The lights, radios, and television go on and off at odd times and there are no electrical problems. Doors unexpectedly open and close. Water faucets turn on by themselves. Sometimes we hear footsteps at night. His blurry presence has even shown up in photos taken at the restaurant."

A very unusual legacy indeed for this unique restaurant located on the outskirts of Allegan, a small town of about 5,000 in west Michigan.

But Jack is only one of the reasons the Grill House is being featured on the Travel Channel's "Food Paradise" show.

Eight Minutes of Fame

"We thought it was a joke at first," explained Marcia, when discussing the original contact by a researcher for the Travel Network. "He was surfing the Internet for an upcoming segment on steak houses and found our website."

"He asked me to explain why the Grill House should be featured on the Food Paradise show," Marcia said. "I emailed him about the quality of our food, how we feature grill-your-own steaks, and how beautiful this area is. I also sent photos," she said. "Of course, I had to tell him about Jack," she added.

The Travel Channel was intrigued. She laughed when describing the whole TV experience. "It was fun. All of our staff wanted to work that night. It was a busy Friday night and our customers had to sign waivers." She added, "The film crew also explained that although they were here filming for six hours, it likely will be edited to an eight-

minute segment on the Food Paradise show.”

Still, it's eight minutes on a national television show. Most restaurants just can't buy that kind of exposure!

The Grill Experience



Another draw for the Travel Channel was the grill-your-own steak aspect of the menu. Expert grill masters are available from 4:30 (when the grill is ready) until late in the evening. “I grew up in Iowa where grill-your-own steak restaurants are more common,” said Marcia.

“We knew from that experience that many people actually get a kick out of standing around the grill, experimenting with their own spices, and chatting with their friends and neighbors. The whole thing becomes more of an event.”

Up Close and Personal



“Elegant and casual” describes both the Grill House and Marcia Wagner. Her warm touch is imprinted everywhere on the restaurant. From the décor to staffing to business decisions, Marcia is a hand's-on owner with vision. Born in Iowa, she has both the hard-working ethic of the Midwest as well as the entrepreneurial spirit of Chicago. She also

knows how to showcase the Grill House.

But being on a television show was the last thing Marcia and Dan Wagner thought about when they bought the property. They owned a cottage in the area and frequently drove past the vacant restaurant.

After working in both the finance and banking industry and in a food distribution business, Marcia thought it might be fun to reopen the restaurant. Although it would mean that Dan (who still owns a mechanical contracting business in Chicago) would travel back and forth more frequently until he retired, he enthusiastically agreed.

Marcia also understood both the potential pitfalls and

rewards in owning a restaurant business. She observed, “In both my previous careers, I learned that most restaurants go under in the first year because the owners don't keep a sharp eye on the bottom line. We do that each and every day.”

When asked for what advice she might give to other restaurant owners, Marcia suggested focusing on in-house operating expenses that you can control. For example, turn off lights when they're not needed or try to negotiate better prices with your suppliers, and buy locally when you can.

“We also spend our marketing dollars carefully. Most of our customers are word-of-mouth,” Marcia said, “so we don't have to do a lot of print advertising to get people in the front door. We have a good website plus an email distribution list of over 5,000 people. That allows us to get the word out very inexpensively about any promotions we're doing.”



Know Your Customers

When asked further about her customers, Marcia explained, “We have a very broad customer base. Friends and families, people celebrating class reunions and anniversaries, plus business people come through our door each day.”

On the weekends, the Grill House becomes a destination location for regular customers from western Michigan as well as nearby seasonal cottage owners.

In the 10 years they have owned the restaurant, the Grill House has gone from a small restaurant to a large facility that can accommodate many different functions. Their main dining rooms seat 150 (scattered among several rooms), the Rock Bottom (the pub located downstairs) seats another 70, and the outdoor dining area seats 100 in season.

The Silo, the large barn-style banquet facility located next door, offers seating for up to 350 as well as smaller

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Find it: The Grill House is located 2 miles south of Allegan, Michigan at 1071 32nd Street (Highway M-40 South)

Phone: 269-686-9192

Website: www.grillhouse.net

MLBA: Marcia Wagner is also a member-at-large on MLBA's board of directors. She invites you to contact her with any questions you may have. Her e-mail address is: Marcia@grillhouse.net.

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meeting rooms. To meet the needs of other customers, the Grill House also offers off-site catering for special events.

Benefits of MLBA

Marcia and Dan are in the process of building another restaurant and small hotel (10 rooms) in Allegan plus they're purchasing another building for a different business. "This gives us a presence in downtown Allegan and will allow us to meet the needs of overnight guests to the area," said Marcia.

When we talked about the challenges of expanding their restaurant

business, Marcia emphasized the tremendous asset that MLBA membership has been to her and Dan.

"Ronnie Polad, in particular, is MLBA's secret asset. She has helped us through the intricacies of licensing and other aspects of our business." Marcia added, "I can't emphasize enough that people who are in the hospitality industry can really benefit from belonging to MLBA and using their programs, such as TAM®. We appreciate the lobbying that MLBA does for business owners like us and we find the Michigan Beverage Journal to be very helpful in staying on top of trends and issues."

Does Jack Live On?

So is Jack an original element of a clever marketing strategy at the Grill House or does his spirit live on through mischievous pranks?

Perhaps a little of both . . .

This I know for sure: visitors to the Rock Bottom pub can't help but notice the Jack Daniels Old No. 7 neon sign next to the fireplace that boldly declares "Jack Lives Here."

Was it just a coincidence that this sign was available at MLBA's recent auction?

Maybe we don't know Jack! ■