**Courthouse Pub in Manitowoc, Part 2**

While the new building was being constructed, the hard work on the Courthouse Pub had just begun.

The first step was to determine our identity, “Who are we?” through the menu. Do we want to serve what everyone is serving and compete with them? Or do we want to serve something unique yet not offensive to the public?

I mentioned serving sushi rolls at one point, and Brother John (yes, that’s the nickname I gave him) looked at me straight in the eyes and said, “Pete, if I want to serve bait, I would open a tackle shop.” That was the end of my modern idea of keeping up with the restaurant trend.

Then one time, I mentioned that we should follow the Wisconsin trend and serve Friday fish fry. To make us different, I was thinking that instead of serving deep-fried cod like everyone does, we could serve some different kind of fish.

I suggested that instead of cod like everyone does, how about walleye? He looked at me straight in the eye again, and muttered, “Why?” I repeated myself again, “Walleye?” He looked more confused each time when he answered, “Why?”

Finally, after the fourth or fifth time, the manager, Steve, stepped in and interrupted our conversation. “No,” he said, “Pete said ‘Walleye.’ Wall-eye, got it?”

Everyone laughed. I was totally embarrassed, but I laughed along. Walleye Pete, they would call me and even got me a jacket with the name embossed on it. Still have the jacket, and still enjoy telling the story when everyone asks me about the name.

“Walleye Pete” is stuck with me for life. Love it. What fond memories indeed.

The menu has been upgraded many times, but there are two things on the menu which they kept. My pride and joy!

One was the Courthouse chicken chili with cannellini beans. It started out as a joke. I would love to see when our guests try to order a bowl of our house chili. Try to say that fast without spitting on someone.

Someone caught on and shortened the name to Courthouse chili. But I’ve had my share of fun. The secret of the chili is add a lot of great wine and let it simmer for hours.

I don’t know what the practice is now, but in the early days we sold a lot of wine by the glass. After a few days, the opened bottles were not good to serve the public anymore; so the bar manager would give those bottles to the kitchen.

Goodness, I would not use an $85 bottle of wine to make chili in my home. But everything goes at the pub. So, to have a bowl of Courthouse chicken chili with cannellini beans which might cost you $5, it actually costs the owner $65. Is that a good deal? No wonder it is still one of the best-sellers at the pub!

Another of my creations is the crispy fried artichoke hearts. It is artichoke hearts that are deep-fried and served on a sizzling platter. The food distributor claims that we sold more artichoke hearts in the Courthouse Pub than the whole state of Wisconsin.

I wish I could believe him; and I wish he would send me a check for the profit he makes.

Besides tasting great, the presentation is awesome! The fried artichoke hearts are placed on a sizzling platter, with garlic lemon butter poured on top. It sizzles all the way from the kitchen to your table. The aroma permeates the whole dining room. How can anyone not order one for their own table afterward?

Prior to the grand opening, we actually did a trial dinner with all kinds of forms to get the guests’ feedback. We would show our guests the menu, with descriptions and pricing. We would serve some of the entrees and ask our guests what they thought of the presentation, the quality of the foods with the pricing structure.

“Would you pay $17.95 for this entree? It comes with fresh oven-baked bread with local butter.” The response was overwhelming. “Yes, yes, yes …”

Folks were anticipating a bit of difference in their dining routine. Rather than local diners serving home-cooked meals, they were ready for something different. Well, hats off to Brother John, he had a vision of what locals needed. Glad to be a part.

Besides developing the menu, the next most important assignment was to create a budget in operating the restaurant. That’s the most challenging part of my career, how to make money to pay bills.

The financial institutions are most friendly when you don’t need any money. Yet, when you actually do need money for cashflow, they are nowhere to be found.

I’m reading books by a good friend, Phil Peterson, called “Northern Moon,” a story about moonshine business during Prohibition. When you don’t need money, the bankers will knock on your door. Yet, the minute that you show them that you need cash to get by, ha-ha, good luck! Some things never change.

Anyway, I developed a five-year business plan for Brother John and a break-even chart to show how much business he needed to do daily in order to make ends meet. A lot of businesses fail the first year, as they do not have any concept of a Profit & Loss Statement or a budget plan.

My goodness, we all need to know how much money is coming in monthly and how many bills we need to pay out every month. How can we not know that in our business? Surprisingly, 95 percent of the restaurant business fails the first year, as they have no clue about the P&L concept.

Well, the Courthouse Pub made it the first year. I was so proud and pleased.

Brother John understood the food costs, labor costs and all other costs involved in order to operate a daily business; and we have created systems to check and control those expenses.

Looking at the invitation, I smiled with tears running down my face. Wow, what fond memories

I won’t be able to attend his retirement party, but I’ll be there one day soon just to catch up with old times. Maybe Brother John will buy me dinner?

*Peter Kwong’s book “Wok & Roll” is available at phkwong.com.*