



Bar Wars

Stonington Borough's Restaurants all riding the latest trend

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NOAH'S, A DINING INSTITUTION IN THE borough for more than two decades, will reopen Friday with a new look—a full service bar—and a new menu to go with it.

Noah's joins the borough's other year-round restaurants in offering a "light fare" a la carte menu along with the more expensive and more traditional dinner menus. Last year, Boom, the restaurant at Dodson Boat Yard, added a bar and accompanying menu, and in 1998, Water Street Café reopened with a full bar and menu of appetizers, salads and sandwiches. One South Café, just outside the borough on North Main Street, has offered "lighter" fare—nachos, grilled mussels and assorted burgers included—along with a full dinner menu since it opened 16 years ago. Both menus are available at lunch and dinner.

"Our customers approached us and said they really wanted a bar," Noah's owner/chef John Papp said. "This had been in the germination stage, the gestation stage, for a while. We thought about it last winter, but we weren't ready. And we didn't want to do it in the summer, so we started in November."

Noah's always closes for the month of February, so Papp and his partner, Stanley Schwartz, took advantage of the time to get the construction, renovation project finished. They will use the last weeks of February to experiment with the menu and listen to their customers' reactions.

It is a major change for a restaurant that has long been known as a breakfast hangout for the locals, a haven for the ladies who lunch, and a nighttime destination for fine dining.

"The basic idea, I think, is that people want a casual place where they can drop in and get a bite to eat," Papp said. "People aren't looking for the Saturday night fine-dining experience every night of the week. But you'll still be able to get that, too."

"Seventy-thousand people walk through our door every year, and we want to keep that business. Our concept has always been fresh food made from scratch, and that won't change. We will still have the dinners. But you won't have to sit down and spend 50 or 60 dollars for dinner."

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The physical changes are in the small room where patrons enter the restaurant, which used to be home to several booths and the display case for Noah's well-known desserts. The bar, designed by Schwartz, sits in the middle of the room. There will be a couple of small tables in the front. The walls have been painted a deep red and the ceiling dark green. It will be non-smoking.

The dining room is unchanged.

For the rest of the month, the restaurant will offer breakfast until 11 a.m. and then the lunch/bar/dinner menu until closing at 9 p.m. There will be no specials, as Papp and Schwartz plan to test dishes. There will be sandwiches, soups, appetizers, mainstays, for the old lunch menu, including Welsh rarebit and Chinese noodles, burgers. There will also be an array of fresh seafood, which is Noah's trademark.

"We want the customers to talk to us," general manager Debbie Ruffin said. "Tell us what they love, what we don't have that they want."

There will also be a new brunch menu until 2 p.m. on Sundays.

"We wanted to give people more options and more variety," she said.

That was the thinking behind Walter and Stephanie Houlihan's decision two years ago to install a full service bar and "light fare" menu at their borough restaurant, Water Street Café. The Houlihan's had been offering both an extensive bar menu and a regular dinner menu when they operated out of the former Harbor View restaurant. But when that building burned down in an accidental fire in September 1997 and they were forced to reopen in their original—much smaller—location, Walter Houlihan wanted to keep those options available to his customers.

Water Street Café offers a set a la carte menu of largely lower-priced bar food, including sandwiches, salads, burgers and appetizers. There is also an extensive list of higher priced daily specials.

"It's a lot of fun," Houlihan said. "It's not stuffy. There's such a diversity in this area, you have to be able to offer everyone everything year round."

The concept worked, even in such a small space. There are only about 10 tables, but the wait for a seat on a weekend night can be more than an hour. Customers write their names on a blackboard in the entryway.

Last March, Boom debuted its bar menu. Owner Jean Fuller said she expanded the seating in the bar and added the menu, which includes burgers, salads, quesadilla, and even a gourmet version of chicken fingers, in the hopes of increasing liquor sales. She

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doesn't think that business has increased substantially because of the changes, because "people still seem to be most interested in the dining room." The dining room menu is available in the bar, but the bar menu is not available in the dining room.

"I'm glad I did it," Fuller said. "It's another option. There is frequently a wait for a table here, and it's good for the people to have the bar to sit down and wait."

Noah's is ready for a change, Papp said.

"I fluctuate between terror and incredible elation," he said. "We've been doing this for 21 years. We'll be able to give the customer more flexibility, more choices and more options in designing their meal."

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