

restaurants

Enjoying the Classics with Gusto

The Schoolhouse Restaurant in Grand Bend

By KYM WOLFE

A short drive from Huron Country Playhouse, and just a jog away from Grand Bend's main street, the Schoolhouse Restaurant is still just far enough off the beaten path that you might never stumble upon it, but it's well worth a short detour to dine there. The atmosphere is comfortable, the staff is pleasant, the family-friendly menu offers a good variety of dishes, and for the lighter appetite some menu choices are available in smaller portions. The Schoolhouse is well-known for its breakfast fare, which is served until 4 p.m. daily.

The restaurant is owned by a Dutch brother-sister team, Augustyn Merkie and Saskia Turner, who spent their childhood in London and moved to Grand Bend as teenagers. The siblings have clearly staked out their territory in the restaurant: Merkie looks after the kitchen, Turner looks after everything else. "That's why it works," says



The Schoolhouse Restaurant's charming facade

Turner, who was an accountant with no prior restaurant experience when she and Merkie opened the Schoolhouse in 2005. Merkie, on the other hand, has lived and breathed food most of his life. An executive chef, Merkie earned his chops working in Europe, Western Canada, the Yukon, and throughout Ontario before returning to Grand Bend.

The Schoolhouse bills itself as a quality family eatery offering home-cooked meals at reasonable prices. The menu is fairly straightforward — classic breakfast foods (from "Hot and Hearty" to "Fresh and Healthy") and for lunch, salads, burgers, sandwiches, and some "old school favourites" (including chicken pot pie, ratatouille, and fish and chips). The dinner menu offers an appetizing variety of starters, and a good selection of beef, chicken, seafood and pasta entrées. A few dishes have a Dutch twist, including Nasi Goreng, a traditional dish from Indonesia, a former Dutch colony. The dessert list embraces home-made classics such as apple crumble and bread pudding. There is a limited wine and drink list, and specialty coffees are available, but no cocktails.



Everything on the food menu is made fresh on the premises, including the breads and pastries. Many of the ingredients are sourced locally; for example, all of the meats come from Metzger's Meats, just

down the road in Hensall. Merkie's skill in working with local ingredients was showcased in August when he won The Great Lakes Chowder Competition at this year's Aquafest. The challenge

Sweet & Sticky Beef Ribs

Falling off the bone and succulent, these are ribs Fred Flintstone would have been proud of. I use the caps from prime rib rubbed with a spice and slowly roasted for five hours. Add a good chili sauce and you have these!

Serves 4

- 2 beef back ribs, trimmed
- ½ cup (125 mL) rib spice
- 2 cups (500 mL) chili sauce

- 1 Preheat oven to 350° F.
- 2 Rinse ribs under cold running water. Pat dry with paper towel. Rub ribs with spice mixture and place in roasting pan. Cover tightly with tin foil and roast until meat comes easily away from bone, about five hours.
- 3 Brush with chili sauce and return to oven, uncovered, for 10 minutes.

Serve with roasted potatoes and coleslaw.

Chili Sauce

If you slow-roast the tomatoes overnight in a warm oven (150° F), you'll bring out the natural rich freshness of the tomato.

- 30 tomatoes
- 4 cups (1 L) onion, diced
- 3 red peppers, diced
- 3 cups (750 mL) green peppers, diced
- 2 cups (500 mL) celery, diced
- 10 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 cups (750 mL) brown sugar
- 3 cups (750 mL) white vinegar
- 3 tbsp (40 mL) rib spice

Combine all the ingredients in a large pot. Bring to slow simmer and cook until thick, about three hours.

Rib Spice

- 10 tsp (50 mL) salt
- 10 tsp (50 mL) paprika
- 7 tsp (35 mL) onion powder
- 5 tsp (25 mL) garlic powder
- 5 tsp (25 mL) dry mustard
- 5 tsp (25 mL) thyme
- 5 tsp (25 mL) cumin
- 2 tsp (10 mL) black pepper
- 2 tsp (10 mL) white pepper

Mix all the ingredients well.



for Southwestern Ontario chefs was to create chowders using fish from the Great Lakes, with celebrity chef Anthony Walsh of Toronto's Canoe Restaurant leading this year's team of judges.

Also this summer, Merkie published a cookbook, *Cooking with Gusto at the Schoolhouse Restaurant*, a play on both his first name and his passion for creating in the kitchen. Stories about life in the kitchen are interwoven with recipes from the restaurant.

From certain vantage points in the dining room, you can peer into the kitchen and see Merkie and his kitchen staff in action. It's not a large space, and at times it seems they are engaged in an intricate dance as they move quickly and efficiently around one other, shaking a pan here, stirring a pot there, and plating the meals.

The kitchen takes up part of the original classroom space where students attended Grand Bend Public School. The school opened in 1874 and was converted to a private residence in 1925 when a new school was built. At some point, an addition was added to one side for a hair salon; now it is the main dining area. In all, the main level has seating for 48, a private dining room in the lower level can hold up to 18 people, and in warmer weather there are a few tables on the patio for up to 14. Historic pictures adorn the walls throughout, capturing scenes from Grand Bend's past, including the restaurant's signature photo: the class of '21 in front of Grand Bend Public School, School Section No. 8.

The restaurant welcomes a steady stream of Grand Bend visitors, Playhouse patrons and regulars during the busy season, which starts in the spring, hits its peak during summer tourist season, and tapers



off into autumn. "It's quite strong in the fall, as this area is quite beautiful and still draws a lot of people," says Turner.

The Schoolhouse is open year-round, and from October to April there is a theme each month — Oktoberfest, Italian, French, seafood, Mardi Gras and others — which keeps people coming back. And Merkie and Turner are also playing with the idea of offering cooking classes this year.

The Schoolhouse Restaurant
19 81st Crescent, Grand Bend
(519) 238-5515
www.schoolhouserestaurant.ca

HOURS OF OPERATION:
MONDAY TO FRIDAY,
9 A.M. TO 9 P.M.
SATURDAY AND SUNDAY
8 A.M. TO 9 P.M.

KYM WOLFE is a freelance writer based in London.

Executive Chef and co-owner Augustyn Merkie, left, and his sister and co-owner, Saskia Turner, right, opened The Schoolhouse in 2005. The interior, above, embraces the building's past with style.

