

This roadhouse rocks

Great Notch Inn has it all: bikers, brew and live bands

By **JIM BECKERMAN**
STAFF WRITER

If the Great Notch Inn looks like the kind of roadhouse you'd see on TV, it might be because you *did* see it on TV.

Branford Marsalis shot a video here. Mrs. T's Pierogies used it as the backdrop for a commercial. "Winter Passing" (2005), with Ed Harris and Will Farrell, and "BuzzKill," an upcoming film with "Saturday Night Live's" Darrell Hammond, are two of the movies that have taken advantage of the joint's classic Americana look.

And the "roadhouse" mystique of the Great Notch, with its green and orange neon on the outside and its rows of motorcycles vroom-vrooming in the parking lot on summer nights, has been catnip to musicians as well.

Some 40 bands are in rotation six days a week here, and several "Last Roadhouse" CDs, made on-site, were released by a local label, Silk City Records.

The earthy look of this Little Falls juke joint is something of a mixed blessing, says owner Rich Hempel.

"Getting people here the first time is what this whole thing is about," says Hempel, who runs the place with his sister Gail Sabbak.

Bouncer-free zone

Drivers on Route 46 who pass the place in full rock-the-house mode might expect to see Patrick Swayze, the bouncer from "Road House," emerge from the front door any minute to kick-box a rowdy into a mud puddle.

But, there *is* no bouncer at the Great Notch — a telling sign.

"Once [people] realize that a

Weekly lineup

Great Notch Inn, 400 Route 46 west, Little Falls. No cover charge. 973-256-7742; greatnotchinn.com or my space.com/greatnotchinn.

■ Monday: open-mike jam.

■ Tuesday: solo acoustic night with John Monnecca.

■ Wednesdays through Saturdays: blues and classic rock.

■ Saturday: classic car show in the lot (11 a.m. to 3 p.m.).

chair is not going to be broken over their backs and they're not going to fly out the swinging doors like the Wild Wild West, then it's good," Hempel says.

Things get lively, to be sure, inside the little bungalow: what with drinks being poured and re-poured (Great Notch Inn Harley Barley Brew, made locally, holds its own with Budweiser and Yuengling), patrons jostling each other on the small dance floor, and rockin' little combos like the Slippery Chickens, the featured artists several Fridays back, talking a lyrical blue streak:

*"Take off your dress now baby
Step out a bit*

Pull it over your head ..."

And true, the place does attract bikers. But Vinny Dean insists that those in his crowd are no Hell's Angels.

"People have this perception," says Dean, 56, of Westwood, who rides in on his Harley Electra Glide whenever the mood takes him. "They see a lot of motorcycles lined up and they think, 'How am I gonna get out of here alive?'"

Most nights, too, there are plenty of women customers — and they don't seem nervous about being there.

"It's one of those bars where nobody bothers you, very friendly," says Eliz Anhar, 43, of Wayne.

The bikers are among the happy accidents that befell Hempel

when he and his sister took over the 68-year-old joint in 1988.

The bikers brought other bikers — and they've proved a loyal core audience. One result is that, unlike many music clubs that struggle for customers, the Great Notch has a virtual built-in crowd.

"Being that we're right on the highway, it's an easy-in, easy-out for them," says Hempel, 42, a Little Falls resident. "Hey, they're good customers, good guys, and we treat everybody with respect here. Unless you don't deserve it."

Shotgun greeting

Bikers weren't an issue back when Hempel's grandfather, Gregory DiLeo, ran the place.

No bikes, no beards, no blue jeans — those were among the rules of DiLeo's Great Notch Inn. He ran the place on his own sweet time, and customers frequently had to knock to see if the place was open at all.

That, Hempel says, was when the joint was *really* scary.

"He answered the door with a shotgun in his hand sometimes," Hempel says.

To hear Hempel tell it, DiLeo was a true character: a sometimes-ornery eccentric whose talent for imitating tri-tone train whistles (a souvenir of his years with the Erie Lackawanna Rail-

road) earned him guest spots on John A. Gambling's radio show, and who, toward the end of his life, opened his place for only five or six hours a night — and only to people he liked.

His motto: "The customer is never right."

"He wouldn't serve me sometimes, and I *knew* him," says bartender Gary Mohren, 63, who has worked at the Great Notch since 1988 — the year DiLeo died and his grandson took over.

To this day, Hempel says, customers come in constantly with stories about his grandfather.

"He was known for cutting the grass out there, on Route 46, in his underwear," Hempel says. "And then there's the whole shotgun thing. Any story I ever heard of him, that came short of his actually shooting somebody,



TYSON TRISH/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Mike Oliveri and Jerry Scaringe of the Slippery Chickens performed recently at the Great Notch Inn.

was probably true."

DiLeo bought the property in 1924, back when Route 46 was just a dirt road, and ran a food stand called the Green Chateau there for 15 years.

This was the era of Prohibition — and family tradition has it that DiLeo sold more than just butter and eggs.

"In the back they had the little bottles going," Hempel says. "If the law came in, they'd hit them with a hammer and throw it all down the sink."

In 1939, Route 46 was widened to become a paved road, and the Green Chateau was demolished. But DiLeo had other plans for his property.

He purchased a neighbor's house across the street — also due to be demolished — for \$1, had it rolled on logs across the street to its present site, sunk \$2,500 into new woodwork and foundations, and reopened as a restaurant: the

Great Notch Inn.

"My grandmother was the cook, and he was the bartender, and they did it every day and that was their life," Hempel says.

By the end of his life, DiLeo was schooling Hempel in the hospitality trade — *his* version of hospitality.

Now a live band joint

Every night, Hempel — then a college student — would come by and help his grandfather close up. And every night, DiLeo would teach him one thing about the business.

"He said, 'Richard, while I'm alive, you're gonna do things the way I want you to do 'em,'" Hempel says. "When I'm gone, you can do whatever you want. But if I were you, I'd sell it the day I died."

Hempel took half of his grandfather's advice.

He didn't sell the place. But

first with the help of his mother, Florence Hempel, and then with his sister, he did begin to transform the Great Notch into something closer to his own heart.

And since Hempel is a drummer, that involved music.

"These days, I don't really even look for bands," he says. "They find me."

Nowadays, Hempel gets his kicks sitting in with the bands on Monday's open-mike night and hobnobbing with customers during the five nights he's behind the bar.

And happily, after almost 20 years in the business, he shows few signs of developing into a crusty character like his grandfather.

Which is probably just as well. "He was a little guy," Hempel says. "I'm a lot bigger. It might be dangerous."

ON THE COVER: The dance floor gets crowded inside the neon-lit Great Notch Inn in Little Falls. Staff photos by Tyson Trish.

For video of the Great Notch Inn's live music, go to northjersey.com/tr

E-mail: beckerman@northjersey.com