

# Great Notch Inn: Classic roadhouse serves up brews, the blues

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recall throwing a customer out in 17 years.

It is a point he takes pains to emphasize, not so much because of his grandfather's curmudgeonly reputation, but because of the Great Notch's more recent image as a biker bar.

"People see the bikes in parking lot," he says. "Sometimes they get intimidated."

Hempel, who lives in Little Falls, does not drive a motorcycle himself. He thinks they're dangerous. But the bar's location and its spacious gravel parking lot make it a natural biker hangout. In the summer, they gather on the old wooden porch with their beers and talk about their Harleys.

In the lonely dusk of a rainy Autumn Monday, though, with its comforting neon and old-fashioned bar smell, the Great Notch looks more like what it is — a cozy local place. The old roadhouse sits in a wooded grove on the banks of an old creek bed. The crowd includes SUV-driving lawyers; college students from nearby Montclair State; employees from the chain restaurants in the strip malls on Route 46. If the music is loud

enough, you almost can't hear the cars.

"I guess people like the time-warp thing," he says.

The "Twin Peaks" look of the place also appeals to location scouts. The bar was the setting for a Mrs. T's pirogi commercial. It appears in "Winter Passing," an upcoming drama starring Ed Harris.

Hempel is counting on the exposure. "They say this is the only business that's recession-proof," he says. "It's not true."

And, of course, like any roadhouse, there is the bar's eternal, complicated relationship with the highway. In the age of drunken driving, the kind of customer who might once have spent his evenings on a barstool is more likely to choose his living room. The state is perpetually threatening to expand Route 46, construction that might or might not mean the end for the Great Notch. For many years, that bothered Hempel. But, he says, "I don't worry about it anymore."

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