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*One-Tank Trip /
Port Dover, Ont.*

Little resort town has fresh culinary ideas

By Steve Veale - SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

PORT DOVER, Ont. — The only time most people hear about the little beachfront resort of Port Dover is through the newspaper reports seen when “bikers” drop into town for Friday the 13th festivities. (The next event will be July 13).

The town swells from 6,000 to about 100,000 literally overnight; vehicular traffic is diverted and replaced by thousands of motorcycles that line the streets along with throngs of black-leathered riders (actually, more doctors and dentists than real gang members). It’s a “happening” — a good old-fashioned street party.

For others, this port on the north shore of Lake Erie — just a pleasant 90-minute drive from Buffalo — has long boasted a (quiet) reputation as a relaxed summer town of white sandy beaches, fishing tugs, yachts and sailboats, inexpensive little weekend B&Bs, romantic rooms at the inn and family cabins for the kids.

There are also nearby campgrounds and trailer parks, boat cruises and skidoo rentals, bargain shopping barns and fresh “pick-your-own” strawberries and apples, as well as half-a dozen golf courses all within a 30-minute drive of town.

Oh yes, and great summer forget-the-calories food: deepfried battered perch, foot-long hot dogs, thick burgers covered with fried onions and french fries forever. No one has ever accused Port Dover of putting on culinary airs. (One local wit lovingly refers to Dover as the “Home of Grease.”)

Then along came Chef Anthony and his Imaginations Fine Foods shop on Main Street.



Photo by: Kimberly Irvine

Chef Anthony Stingo and his wife, Mary Anne Billingshurst, own Imaginations Fine Foods, a nice place to eat in Port Dover, Ont.

Anthony Stingo has created culinary magic in well-known kitchens throughout North America, but he decided that a small-town quality of life was worth more than another review in the New York Times.

The little beach town certainly is a change from the chef's previous gigs in much more exotic locales such as New York City, Miami Beach and the Florida Keys.

New York born-and-bred, Stingo's training started as a 12-year-old on his father's lunch trucks that traveled between construction sites in New York City, where he made sandwiches and pots of soup. He later apprenticed in the Big Apple under well-known Cordon Bleu Chef Richard Burns and worked at Burns' hot Ouzie's during the expense account living of the 1980s, and then served a few years as head chef at the Prince Hamlet Restaurant on Miami's trendy Biscayne Bay.

When Stingo joined the U.S. Navy, he ended up cooking for the officers at the NATO Base in Naples, Italy. Later, Stingo joined his father again, who had moved the family business to the warmer climes of Florida's Pompano Beach. It was here, at the legendary Gus' Clam House, that Stingo truly earned his culinary chops.

There were other establishments along the way, some big, some not so big, but the eventual goal was to establish a place for his skills in a small-town atmosphere.

His wife and partner, Mary Anne Billinghamurst, originally from the Toronto area, suggested they look into a smaller community south of the big city. Port Dover seemed to be the perfect spot for their new lifestyle and culinary enterprises.

It all came together last year when the couple opened Imaginations Fine Foods right in the middle of town. It's just across the corner from the Lighthouse Theatre and faces the town's band shell in the greenery of Powell Park where there are free concerts every Sunday night. In fact, you can stop in and have Stingo make a huge deli sandwich or picnic basket to enjoy while sitting at the park, relaxing on the beach or exploring the Lake Erie shoreline.

The chef's timing could not have been better. "There has been a boom in Port Dover in the past five or six years," Stingo explains. "People have moved in from larger urban centers. They came to Dover for the same reasons we did — the quality of life — but they still want the amenities of the big city."

Indeed, this little port town is ready to hone its taste buds, and others beside Stingo have tried their hand at it to considerable success.

David's Restaurant at 168 New Lakeshore Road was the first truly fine dining establishment in the area and quickly became known for its spectacular design, comfortable ambience and New York City-dining prices. The multimillion dollar, 120-seat restaurant opened two summers ago and often draws full houses.

The restaurant, located across the bridge, up the hill and along the lakeshore, eschews the deep fryer for perfectly seared steaks, rare roast beef, grilled seafood and delightful al dente pasta dishes.

Then there's the homey and stately charm of Hemming's Broken Plate, 602 Main St., a former bed-and-breakfast. Brothers Wayne and Craig opened on Easter weekend 2006 and have been booked solid since then.

Even the casual food at the town's only beachfront eatery, The Beach House at 2 Walker Road, has jumped up a notch since being taken over by Port Dover's Knechtel family (of Knechtel's on the Beach and The Catch Restaurant). Manager Peter Knechtel recently brought in six 30-foot palm trees and planted them out front to bring a Caribbean feel to the beach — you can relax on the patio deck, look out over Lake Erie, and imagine you are lounging in Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville.

Similarly, the former tiny pizza-and-wings Main Street bar of Cap'n Billys has been transformed into a fine dining cafe with an adjoining 140-seat casual restaurant set to open over the long July weekend.

Dinner at the Erie Beach Hotel, with its 1950s-style rolling salad cart, is always a treat — although some of us prefer the more casual platters of delicately fried perch (corn meal, not batter) and jugs of cold draught beer in the upper level Terrace Room. This is one place where loyal customers implore owners Andrew and Pam Schneider to please resist making any changes to “their” dining room — although half of the upper restaurant was renovated this past winter to provide a lighter, brighter family feel.

The spacious Angelo's and The Norfolk Tavern — “bars with bands” — both take on the atmosphere of a huge house party, and are filled with locals every night in the summer.

In many ways, Stingo's shop resembles the classic smalltown soda shoppe where locals would drop in for a chat, some advice on cooking and the latest gossip.

“Every new dining establishment that opens in the area, such as Hemmings and David's, only serves to enhance what I do and adds to the local dining experience,” Stingo says.

But never fear, summer cottagers: You will always be able to get Port Dover's perch and fries. Now, however, your taste buds and cravings will have more of a choice, thanks to Chef Anthony and some new culinary thinking in this little resort town.

If you go

For information: The Port Dover Board of Trade, Information Centre, at 17 Market St., (519) 583-1314, www.portdover.ca. For information about Canada's South Shore, contact Haldimand-Norfolk Information Centre, (519) 426-6655

Port Dover Harbour Marina, 50 Passmore St., (519) 583-1581, www.portdoverharbourmarina.com Port Dover Lighthouse Theatre, (519) 583-2221, www.lighthouse theatre.com Restaurants: Imaginations Fine Food, 301 Main St., (519) 583-1717, www.imaginationsfinefoods.com The Erie Beach, 19 Walker Ave., (519) 583-1391, www.eriebeachhotel.com The Beach House, 2 Walker Ave., (519) 583-0880

Davids, 168 New Lakeshore Road, (519) 583-0706, www.davidsportdover.com Hemmings Broken Plate, 602 Main St., (519) 583-9595

Fisherman's Catch, Walker Street, (519) 583-1801

Knechtel's, Walker Street, (519) 583-1908 Accommodations:

The Erie Beach Hotel, 19 Walker Ave., (519) 583-1391, www.eriebeachhotel.com Brant Hill Inn, 30 John St., (519) 583-1501, www.branthillinn.com Baker's B&B by the Lake, 30 Elm Park, (519) 583-1010

Buck's Cottages, 206 St. George St., (519) 583-2263