

into the WOODS on Mackinac Island

story by Patty LaNoue Stearns | photography by Balthazar Korab

✕ How many restaurants can you think of that require a 20-minute horse-drawn carriage ride to get there? Or that can boast a vintage 19th Century duckpin bowling alley? ✕ Those are just two cool claims Mackinac Island's Woods restaurant can make, the former because no cars are allowed on the island, the latter because the one-lane alley came with the magnificent Tudor manse that houses the restaurant.

Yes, the Woods is out in the woods, near the Woods Nine of the Jewel golf course, and it's steeped in quirky history. It originally was built as a children's playhouse on the 1905-era Stonecliffe estate. The raised stage was part of an "amusement lounge" for the Hert children, a wealthy Kentucky family prominent in the Republican party in the early 1900s.

The ski-motif stained glass windows are newer, added by televangelist Rex Humbard, who owned it in the 1970s, when the Stonecliffe property was a ski resort. And famed interior designer Carleton Varney is responsible for the hunting-lodge décor, all of which adds up to a unique dining experience.

The Woods menu is a mix of Bavarian specialties and modern American cuisine. It's prepared by Austrian chefs under the watch of Hans Burtscher, executive chef and food and beverage manager for all of the Grand Hotel's restaurants, including the Woods. The Swiss-born chef started his career at age 15 in Europe as a pastry apprentice. He has been with the Grand Hotel 24 years.

"I try to please the Midwest crowd," he says. "Modern but not too fussy." That means whitefish, trout and perch specials from local waters, and in-season Michigan produce like fresh cherries and asparagus. Chef Burtscher says diners' tastes are getting more adventuresome, reflected in this year's menu: "When I started here more than 20 years ago, the demand was for prime rib and whitefish. Now people want duck, venison, buffalo and veal shanks."

The 44-year-old Burtscher's traditional caraway-scented cuisine includes house-ground-and-stuffed sausages (all the meats are butchered on premises). But to lighten up this traditionally lard-laden food, his menu has fewer dumplings. "It's streamlined," says Burtscher. You'll find bread pudding and polenta, but you won't find sweetbreads, brains or organ meats. However, "the salads still have the European taste—very vinegary," says the chef.

Choose a wine from the extensive list, then perhaps an appetizer of smoked brook trout or wild mushroom and basil stew over a puff pastry crisp. Try a cup of Austrian steak soup or chilled potato-leek, unless you'd rather inhale a salad of roasted red beets and shaved onions with horseradish dressing. Move into a steaming dish of sauerbraten—roasted beef in red wine with root vegetables, red cabbage and German noodles.

Don't forget to leave room for dessert—remember, this chef cut his teeth on pastries.

Afterward, you can dance off the calories to the jazzy piano, bowl a set, and then take the return carriage. If you're really feeling full, walk the mile or so back downtown. ■

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