

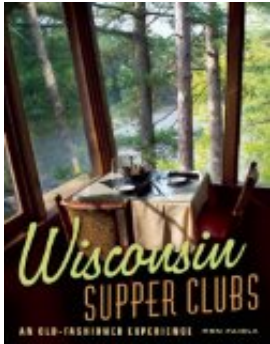
A Traveler's Library

Books, Movies, and other Travel Inspirations

A Taste and a Sip of Old Fashioned Wisconsin Supper Clubs

🕒 September 6, 2013 📁 Books, Food, General, Guide Books 📖 book review, Brette Sember, drink recipe, food and drink, guest post, historic dining, mid century, travel guide, Wisconsin supper clubs 👤 Brette Sember

TASTY TRAVEL



Destination: Wisconsin

Book: *Wisconsin Supper Clubs: An Old-Fashioned Experience* by Ron Faiola

Article by Brette Sember

A supper club sounds glamorous to me, something from the era of crinolines and fedoras when dinner in a restaurant was an *Event* you put on your finest for. The concept had me imagining cigarette girls drifting among tables, flaming baked Alaska for dessert, and Studebakers in the parking lot. Clearly I have some

unresolved fantasies about the middle of the 1900s.

I'm not the only one though. Ron Faiola has written a book called *Wisconsin Supper Clubs: An Old-Fashioned Experience*. The back story on this book is that Faiola, a filmmaker, produced and directed a film of the same name in 2011. The film became popular in Wisconsin (people were taking vacations to follow in his footsteps) and a book soon followed. Supper clubs are extremely popular in Wisconsin among residents and Midwestern visitors traveling to the state.

Retro is Back in Style in Wisconsin

Wisconsin Supper Clubs is not a cookbook (there is just one recipe at the very back). Instead this is a guide to the supper club dining opportunities in the state. Faiola visited (and dined at) every single one in this book and interviewed all of the owners personally. I had no idea supper clubs had a huge cult following in the great state of Wisconsin. There's one area, called the Crossroads of the North that has 20 supper clubs within a 30-mile radius. The supper club is not dying out at all and is holding its own in the face of chains. The supper club is experiencing a resurgence according to Faiola, who cites Wisconsin-style supper clubs that are emerging in New York and Chicago.



Ishnala Supper Club in Lake Delton, Wisconsin.

Photo courtesy of Ron Faiola

Supper Club Signs

So what is a Wisconsin supper club exactly? Faiola says they began more than 80 years ago, often as dance halls, taverns, speakeasies, or roadhouses and were reborn as supper clubs in the 40s and 50s, peaking in the 50s and 60s. Almost all were (and are now also) family-owned. They were born as upscale establishments

where tablecloths set the tone for a grown-up night out, Dad taking Mom out so she could wear her pearls. Many offered live entertainment. A key trait is the presence of the brandy old-fashioned (hand-muddled), the cocktail mascot of the supper club. The menus originated with “fancy” items diners wouldn't have at home: lobster, shrimp, steak, and prime rib.

Design from the Past in Wisconsin Supper Clubs

Today's Wisconsin supper clubs are old-fashioned, with the owners intent on maintaining their ambience and mid-century style. This is not necessarily a bad thing. If you page through this book (which is packed with photos), you will notice that almost all of the clientele have white hair (diners who likely were around for the beginning of the supper club era and continue to find it pleasing), but there are also some young families at the tables. Faiola says tourism is a major driving factor in the popularity of the supper club.

The décor definitely looks like it belongs in Wisconsin – lots of dark interiors, dark wood, Christmas lights strung on walls and bars, paneling, dead animals on the walls, and a heavy German influence. Some of the tablecloths (when there are any) are plastic and there are paper placemats galore. A lot of restaurants have numbers on the tables. There's even a garden gnome to be found in the pages. Some still have velvet booths and chandeliers. There's a lot of red. Fortunately, kitschy is in, so these great old places have a throwback glory about them that doesn't feel tired.

Many are situated in amazing locales on lakes and with names like **HobNob**, **Cimaroli's Supper Club**, **Shaffer Park Resort and Supper Club**, **Buck-A-Neer Supper Club**, and **The Steak Pit**, you get a sense of what these places are all about. The photos not only show the interiors, but the beautiful wooded lakefront locations. Sometimes there is a large statute of a cow out front. One has a pink elephant. Many of the restaurants look a bit aged on the outside, but this is part of their charm.

Sampling the Fare at Wisconsin Supper Clubs

The supper club menus know their heritage and focus on hearty meals of yesteryear which means they all serve steak and fish fry (usually local walleye) and have surf and turf and prime rib on offer. French fries abound. Faiola says that most restaurants also offer 21st century specials which are popular with the tourist crowd (in other words, these folks really can cook). Another key food characteristic is the presence of relish trays, silver trays brought to the table at the beginning of the meal, loaded with olives, pickles, celery, radishes, and even baby ears of corn. The soup and salad bar is another sign you're in a supper club, and

Jello is considered a salad. After you've filled yourself up with red meat or fried fish, you'll want to end your meal with a grasshopper sundae.



Prime Rib at Wisconsin Supper Club

All of this sounds super retro and not very culinarily inventive, but as I read the book, I kept a running list of the menu items I wanted to try: mock chicken legs (pork and beef on a skewer, deep fried), duck, deep-fried turtle, smelt, handmade fried cheese curds, pickled gizzards, prime rib fritters, strawberry schaum torte, gator balls, French-fried turkey, popovers with honey butter, Native American fry bread, and walleye and wild rice fish cake.

Some of the choices sound like just plain fun: a plate-sized, 2-inch thick hash brown; a restaurant that gives you a choice of tomato juice or soup as a starter; or meals that always come with cranberry sauce and a sugar cookie. Then there's the lazy Susan fish fry: family-size sides are placed on a lazy Susan in the middle of the table (think cole slaw, potato salad, rye bread, flavored butters, pickles, pasta salad, and raw veggies) and everyone shares.

Hit the Wisconsin Supper Club Road

The book is broken into geographic areas, so you could take a driving tour of all of the supper clubs for your summer vacation if the mood struck. Each of the 50 restaurants has four pages, mostly photos, but also text that describes their history, the current owners, their signature dishes, and conversations Faiola had with the owners and staff. It really is like being there.

Want a taste of the Wisconsin supper clubs? Try this cocktail.

[gmc_recipe 20190]



Brette writes often about travel, food, and home arts and is the author of more than 40 books about food, law, health, family issues, business, finance and textbooks. She blogs at [Putting It All on the Table](#) and her personal web site is [Brette Sember](#).

[Brette Sember](#) – who has written 27 posts on [A Traveler's Library](#).



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About Brette Sember

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2 thoughts on “A Taste and a Sip of Old Fashioned Wisconsin Supper Clubs”



Kerry Dexter

September 6, 2013 at 1:36 pm

I was just watching a rerun of an episode of the television show Castle in which they investigate a case with ties to events in a supper club in 1947 — in New York, this one, and what’s on the menu doesn’t feature. the art directors and set designers (and costume designers) did a fine job with the retro aspects though, and interesting to think about while reading your comments on this book.



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September 6, 2013 at 12:44 pm

what fun!! i’d love, love, love to go. i wonder if we have any in michigan – research is in order! 😊

Comments are closed.