

HAPPY DINERS IN HOUSATONIC

Pleasant & Main fills void in village for food service geared to local population

BY JOHN TOWNES

In 2001, when his restaurant business near the World Trade Center suffered extensive damage in the terrorist attacks of 9-11, Craig Bero decided to hang tough in the aftermath.

"I basically lost everything," he said. "But, even though many other businesses left the neighborhood after that, I decided to stay and rebuild."

While resilient in the face of those events and circumstances, Bero found himself a dozen years later facing an entirely different type of challenge when his landlord notified him this past January of an exorbitant rent

increase. At that point, Bero decided it was time to leave — immediately.

"I started packing up the truck that night," he recalled. "The next day I was on the road to the Berkshires."

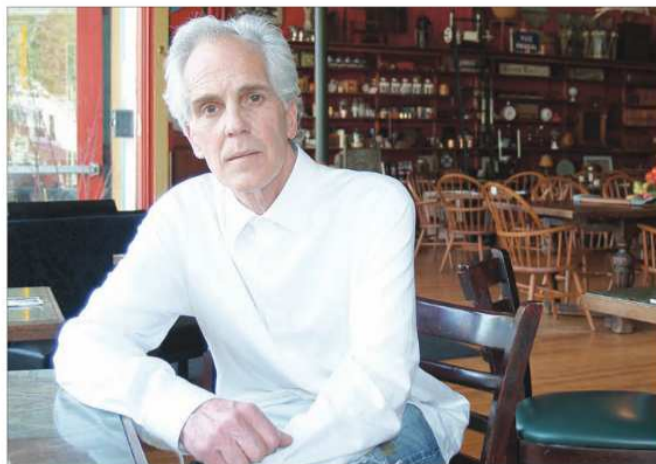
As a result, the village of Housatonic has gained a new business, the Pleasant & Main Cafe and General Store, at 1063 Main St. The vacant street-level storefront had previously been the site of Jack's Grill.

"It's already been an amazing and rewarding experience."

Bero's decision was not as impetuous as it sounds on the surface.

"I was already thinking about leaving before I was hit with the rent increase," said Bero, who had operated a number of small restaurants including Anglers and Writers and the Cosmopolitan Cafe. "After being in the restaurant business in New York for 35 years, I had gotten tired of city life. That was just the last straw."

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A recent arrival from New York City and a longtime player in its restaurant scene, Craig Bero says he left the city's expensive trendiness behind when opening his new cafe in the village of Housatonic.

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Pleasant & Main Cafe

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Bero explained that he had regularly visited the Berkshires, and also made frequent trips to neighboring Columbia County in New York to buy food for his restaurants.

Last autumn, he and a friend took a jaunt to Housatonic on one of these buying trips.

"I'd always loved Housatonic, and, when I saw that this space was vacant, I instantly felt that this is exactly where I wanted to be," he said. "I contacted the owners of the building to find out more. So, we had already talked about leasing this. Then, when my rent in New York was raised, I made the decision to actually do it in one day."

While he is the on-site manager, Bero has two partners in the business. They include Charif Adlouni, a friend who operates a restaurant in New York, and Pascale Rossi, another friend who lives on the Mediterranean island of Corsica.

"I'm the one who works here on a daily basis, but they were instrumental in designing it and setting it up, and they're very involved in it," said Bero.

Bero said their goal from the beginning was to operate a cafe and store that would serve the local community in Housatonic and that would reflect the town's traditional identity — and the budgets of local residents.

That is also shown in the cafe's name, which comes from its location at the junction of Pleasant and Main streets in the village's central business district.

"I realize that a natural reaction might be that I'm another New Yorker who has decided to come to the Berkshires and impose an expensive, trendy business here," he said. "But, hopefully, once they come in, they'll realize that's not the case at all. My goal is simply to operate an affordable and friendly cafe that serves great food to the local community and is reflective of the town."

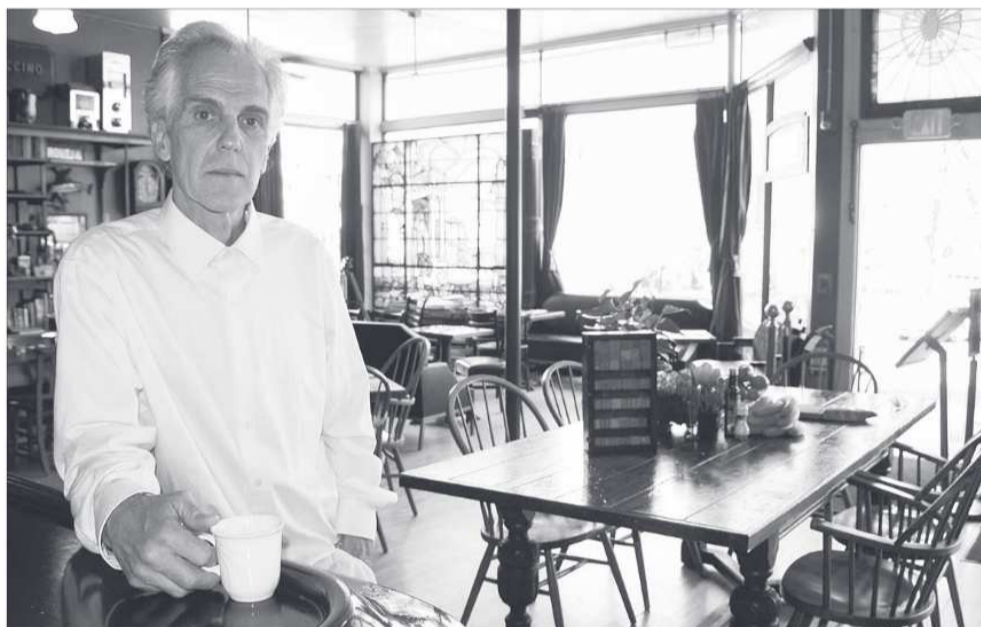
Bero added that, while he has spent much of his adult life in New York and had long enjoyed the city, he is a product of a small town.

"I grew up on a farm in a very rural area in northern Wisconsin, in a town that is very much like Housatonic," he said. "I think that's why Housatonic appealed to me so much. And one great thing about being in the Berkshires is that you can still have access to the kind of cultural activities that I enjoyed in New York."

He also noted that his family was involved with the food business, and that he had majored in agriculture at the University of Wisconsin.

"One of our goals is to use locally sourced food as much as possible," he said. "With my background, that comes naturally. I did that in New York, too."

He noted, however, the challenge that exists in striking a balance between the use of locally sourced food and their determination to be in an affordable mid-price range. He said they will integrate as much local fresh and natural food as possible, but it will not be exclusively oriented to that.



After handling a Mother's Day tally of 258 guests, Craig Bero enjoys the relative calm of the following Monday, the day of the week that his new Housatonic cafe is closed. He says the strong response to Pleasant & Main reflects his intention to make the cafe and general store appealing and affordable for local residents.

"While I can't serve \$35 all-natural steaks, we can offer a great breakfast with fresh eggs and local sausage on the side," he said.

Bero added that he has contacts with farms in the region from his previous restaurants, and he also plans to use imagination to find the best deals on fresh food. There is also a small garden on site that will provide ingredients.

"We don't have the firepower of having a big-name chef or the buying power of a large restaurant," he said. "But by going out and meeting local farmers and doing things like making deals to buy their overabundance, we'll be able to do it."

To transform the vacant 5,000-square-foot space into Pleasant & Main, Bero spent the winter stripping the interior down to its basics and remodeling it.

He noted that in its more distant past the space had been a hardware and general store. "It's always an interesting challenge to take an empty space and develop something from it," he said. "In this case, we let the history of the space define what it would be, based on the aesthetic of its past as a store. We uncovered and reclaimed many of its original fixtures and furnishings."

The interior incorporates this mix of its identity as a 45-seat cafe and its historic and current role as a store. The tables and chairs share space with shelves, old counters and other items that display its retail wares, which include an eclectic assortment of items, such

as penny nails, fishing gear, antiques and penny candy, among others.

A garden to the rear of the building — enclosed on three sides by the remaining foundation of a former barn, and covered by a natural canopy of large shade trees — is being eyed for additional seasonal seating and other events.

The business currently has a staff of four, who have moved from New York with Bero, including his longtime chef.

Initially the cafe has been primarily oriented to breakfast and lunch service. In addition, it serves "community suppers" on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings.

Pleasant & Main (413-274-6303 or www.pleasantandmain.com) is open from 7 a.m. to 3

p.m. Tuesday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturday, and 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Sunday (it is closed Monday). On Thursday through Saturday, it reopens from 5:30 to 8:30 for the community suppers.

The daytime menu features a mix of basic comfort food with specialized touches. It includes breakfast staples such as omelettes, eggs benedict and sides as well as crepes, sandwiches, burgers, salads and soups, along with pastries and other items.

Prices range from \$5.50 for two eggs and bacon, ham or sausage or a quiche of the day to \$6.50 for pancakes to \$12.50 for a fully loaded New England Sampler Plate with eggs, meat, pancakes and other items. Sandwiches range from \$7.50 for an egg salad to \$10.50 for a Cheeseburger Platter, and salads are from \$5 to \$9.50.

The community supper is priced at \$15, which includes soup or salad and a main course or \$20 with dessert. The dinner menu features rotating main courses.

The cafe does not have a liquor license, although Bero said they may seek a wine license at some point.

He noted that the hours are likely to be expanded in the coming months. "I'd also like to open late evenings as a place where people can go after Tanglewood or other

events and relax," he said. "We're not trying to become a full-fledged nightspot, but just offer a relaxed gathering place."

He emphasized that the plan is to start modestly, and evolve over time.

"We're keeping things limited at first, so we can get what we're doing down right," he said. "Then we'll take additional steps gradually."

Bero said the initial response has been very encouraging.

"It's already been an amazing and rewarding experience," he said. "The people in the town have been extremely welcoming and enthusiastic about this. It's been much more powerful than I expected. I've been involved with many restaurant openings, and in all honesty I've never experienced anything like this."

One measure of this early response came on Mother's Day, when Bero said the cafe seated a total of 258 guests.

"That was such an incredible day," he said, noting in particular that, throughout the course of service, the streets outside the cafe were rarely crowded with parked cars. "So many of the people who came that day came [byfoot] from the surrounding neighborhood. That's a great thing for us to see."

While the local clientele is key, Bero said the cafe is also attracting people from other communities in the area. "We assumed that we'd only be attracting people from Housatonic, but word of mouth has been spreading, and people have been coming in from all over the Berkshires," he said.

Bero said he does not know what to expect when the tourist season starts. "I know that the summer here is a whole different ball game," he said. "I don't know what's going to happen, or how that will affect us. We'll have to wait and see."

He noted that his major concern is for the cafe to continue to be oriented to the local population, even if there is an influx of visitors and second-home owners.

"One of the things we're doing is issuing Housatonic Cards to local customers," he said. "That means if you show your card, you're going to get priority treatment when you come in." ♦