

Wisconsin Supper Clubs: Time Capsules of Retro Culture

By Genevieve Vahl

Supper Clubs are staples of Wisconsin's culinary culture. The timeless restaurants carry decades of tradition and memory for Wisconsin residents.

From the quintessential relish trays to delicacies like ice cream cocktails, Wisconsin supper clubs uphold tradition. Emerging in the Prohibition era of the 1930s, any supper club will transport you right back into those original speakeasies. Essential qualities like the retro decor to signature menu items distinguish supper clubs from an average restaurant. Relish trays are the first priority.

Decorated with hot peppers, radishes, celery, carrots and green onions, the tray starts the meal off right. All-you-can-eat soup and salad bars run the risk of ruining your appetite before the meal even starts. Large cuts of meat like prime rib and thick cut steaks are washed down with muddled brandy Old Fashioneds and brandy Alexanders for the entree portion. For supper club regular Susan Becker, the ice cream drinks for dessert are a necessary sweet treat to finish off the night.

“Every place has their own idea of what they consider the best ice cream drink. It depends on each individual,” Becker said. “For me, I love a super thick, almost soft serve ice cream drink. I want it to stand up and peak.”

These ice cream drinks, either minty or almond liqueur flavored, sometimes even have a drizzle of chocolate syrup to coat the inside of the glass. Some places serve theirs more like a milkshake, others are thick. Personal preference determines the best.

The signature aesthetic of supper clubs compliments the featured food items. Becker describes how supper clubs usually have an atmosphere straight out of the 50s, a blast from the past. The little old ladies playing the piano in the dining room sets an ambient mood. The walls are covered with wood paneling or deep colored wallpaper, creating a dark atmosphere throughout the restaurant.

“Cloth table clothes with candles on each table, large wrap around bar with upholstered bar stools, and the supper clubs to the far north typically display taxidermy animals on their walls,” Becker explained.

An extensive alcohol selection and the occasional view overlooking Lake Michigan sets a classic backdrop. Retro lights and crystal chandeliers dimly light the restaurant. Sometimes string lights add a twinkle to the room. Eating at a supper club is a prolonged dining experience, lasting well over two hours to get through all of the courses. With all these common characteristics, three specific restaurants around Wisconsin have perfected their take on the true supper club experience.

The Hobnob in Kenosha sits on the shores of Lake Michigan where you can catch the sunset while sipping a cocktail at the bar. The retro neon sign outside attracts those looking for a classic supper club experience. Once inside, the large fake leather booths, dark persian rugs complimenting the burgundy wallpaper and relics from world travels decorate the various dining rooms. Crystal chandeliers radiate dim lighting for comfort while delving into their signature roasted duckling served a la orange. To finish the night off sweet, the Hobnob is known for their extra-thick grasshoppers.

“Personally I think it’s the best because it’s super thick, and they even hand muddle it; meaning they scoop the ice cream and muddle it, rather than using a blender, and put it in the glass with the liquerer,” said Becker.

Their ice cream drinks include 10 scoops of ice cream making for a peak towering over the shallow glasses. Becker claims they are so big they can easily satisfy two people.

Jackson Grill, on Milwaukee’s industrial south side, brings us to another quintessential supper club in a very unsuspecting neighborhood. The supper club, once family home, located in a residential area feels like you are dining at your neighbor’s house. However, the art-deco bar sets this restaurant apart from any normal neighbor’s in-home bar.

“I love the atmosphere. I love the bar, it’s very 50s.” Becker said. “They have the back bar that lights up. It’s very intimate, they do not have a lot of tables. And the food is good with reasonable prices.”

The small restaurant is run by owners with extensive culinary backgrounds, offering their gourmet renditions of supper club classics. One of the featured dishes includes charred steak topped with portobello mushrooms and whole garlic cloves. Seared scallops over saffron risotto is another option to fire up the taste buds.

“The chef comes out and talks to you at the end of the night when he is all caught up,” Becker recalled, enhancing the unique intimacy.

The Five O’clock Club has been around for over 70 years, and is known for serving some of the best steaks in Milwaukee.

“The steaks are phenomenal. They do something special with the steaks and they are just so good,” said Becker. “It is a little pricey, but everything comes with your meal. You get the bread, the relish tray and your salad.”

About 10 years ago, Becker explained, they used to have servers come around the dining room with a cart carrying the table's relish tray, salad and bread. Unfortunately that tradition was put to rest. Yet, cozy ambience thrives from low ceilings decorated with string lights amongst garland above the bar. Waitresses from the supper club heyday really enhance the authentic experience.

"I liked it because it's so 50s. It's super dark in the dining room. There's literally no windows," Becker said. "There's like red velvet wallpaper. Things haven't changed in probably 50 years. It's gaudy, and I love it."

Their iconic Alley Cat Lounge, a luxury piano bar and lounge, brings in live music every Friday for some entertainment over dinner. The historical background of this supper club livens the supper club aesthetic.

"It's one of those places you should experience once in your lifetime," said Becker.

With over 350 supper clubs in Wisconsin alone, you will not have a problem finding one of these time capsules wherever you may be. Yet, finding those with the best steaks and ice cream drinks will entail some further investigation. People like Susan Becker will continue to rave about the supper club experience even now after the supper club era has become a time of the past. The rich food can be matched with a full experience rich in American cultural history and authentic decor.