Lighthouse restaurant a shining light in Oconee

Event center, cabana part of total package

BY JOHN HACKWORTH
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An architect suggested to Dick Cottingham that he needed a distinctive feature for his unnamed restaurant on the shores of Lake Keowee.

"I thought 'why not a lighthouse?'" Cottingham, the developer and owner of the restaurant said. "But when they suggested I build a stand-alone lighthouse, I decided that no, I wanted to incorporate it into the restaurant."

And he did. Smack dab in the middle of the exquisite lakeside restaurant is a lighthouse doing double duty as a chimney for a four-sided fireplace that adorns the downstairs dining area. The top of the lighthouse sits high above the restaurant and is one of the first things you notice when you drive up to the Lighthouse Restaurant and Event Center.

One of the newest eateries in Oconee County, the restaurant has defied its out-of-the-way location by marketing to employees of Duke's nuclear power station and residents in a number of lakefront communities along SC 130 and SC 183. Its menu is varied and filled with locally-produced food. And, the restaurant is just the main feature. The property also includes an event center and a cabana that sits by the docks which is especially popular in warmer weather.

Cottingham and 24 other investors in the restaurant are more than pleased with its first year of business. But the story of challenges and hurdles Cottingham overcame to get the facility built is as interesting as the gorgeous views from the second floor and the plans to make the property a destination for weddings, family reunions and other events.

"I thought there was a need for a restaurant on the lake, but I looked all around and there was really only this location that was available," the 69-year-old engineer said. "To build here I had to deal with Duke's shoreline plan; we had to get a wastewater treatment permit; we had to get a permit for the boat dock; we had to get Duke to move some power lines that went over the property and we even had to get the state to deed Doug Hollow Road to the county and then get the county to give the road to us and allow us to move it."

Whew!

Cottingham said the dock and wastewater permits were the biggest challenge -- without either of them, the deal would have been dead.

But, over the course of three years and with some perseverance Cottingham made it work. In the end, there is about $3 million invested in the buildings, five parcels of land and 600 feet of lake shoreline that make up the property.

He brought aboard other local investors who believe in the project as much as he does. Their money paid for the furnishings and equipment and they, Keowee Restaurant Group, actually lease the restaurant from Cottingham's Lake Keowee Investors Inc.

Bob Malone is one of those investors.

"All 24 of us are just as enthused about this place as Dick," Malone said.

The group is determined to not only make the restaurant a success, but to do it without harming the environment.

"We wanted to be environmentally friendly," Malone said.

They teamed up with Friends of Lake Keowee and Advocates for Quality Development, two local groups that serve as public watchdogs over the beauty of Oconee County.

The outcome has been grass plots to catch runoff before it gets to the lake; a 1,000-gallon catchment area that collects water that is used for irrigation; features like a dishwasher that uses only .9 gallons of water per rack and other high-efficiency appliances and practices.

But, despite the great story of how the restaurant got built, it ultimately comes down to food and service.

Restaurant manager Andrew Merritt is responsible for making everyone's dining experience a pleasure.

"Business has been incredible," he said. "So many people come in and tell me how glad they are we are here."

The location has not been an issue, he said.

"We have so many people who live nearby and we get a lot of business from Duke. We just sent 20 meals over to the plant and they are having a seminar here today and another 20 people are using our event center and eating lunch here."

The prices are not on the cheap side, but Merritt says the goal is to keep it affordable for families and for people to feel they can come to the restaurant more than once a month or for special occasions.

Sandwiches, salads and entrees fill the expansive menu.

The steaks are all hand cut and certified Angus. The seafood is never

frozen with shrimp shipped up from Charleston and the mountain trout from North Carolina. A new local item on the menu will be Chatooga Belle Farms grits – "they are incredible," Merritt says.

The chef is Mark Winters, a former kitchen manager at Copper River who has a degree from Cornell. Winters keeps his own herb garden on the property to add a fresh touch to certain creations.

Megan Short, of Clemson, was just hired to serve as event planner.

Her job will be to bring in groups for weddings, family reunions and all sorts of get-togethers. A large area just outside the main dining room is being landscaped to offer a view of the lake and mountains and an arbor and other touches will be added to make it a perfect place for weddings.

"We think the event facility (and restaurant) are something that's been needed here for some time," Cottingham said.



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A view of the main dining room from the second floor dining area.

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The Keowee Sunset Salad with its diced mango, candied Cajun pecans and blackened salmon is a menu favorite.



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Blue Ridge Trout, from North Carolina, with lobster cream sauce is just one item on an expansive menu at The Lighthouse Restaurant.

Lighthouse Menu Favorites:

Braised baby back ribs	$16
Blue Ridge trout	$19
Lighthouse pasta	$17
Doug Hollow burger	$9
Keowee sunset salad	$11
BBQ Mahi Mahi tacos	$9



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Managers David Slevin, left, Andrew Merritt and Chef Mark Winters are ready to go to work at the Lighthouse Restaurant and Event Center. The signature lighthouse sits in the middle of the facility and actually serves as a chimney for the large fireplace.