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Wednesday, July 25, 2007

## O'Donnell's seeks memories from diners

by Monica Hogan | Staff Writer

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### O'Donnell's Sea Grill

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Style of cuisine: Seafood

Hours: Mon.-Thurs.: 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m.;  
 Fri.-Sat.: 11:30 a.m.-10:30 p.m.; Sun.: 11:30 a.m.-9 p.m.

Entrée prices: \$15-\$36



Laurie DeWitt/The Gazette  
 Jumbo lump crabcakes are on manager Erik Boone's plate, while owner Bill Edelblut holds a steamed lobster.

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When Bill Edelblut, president of O'Donnell's Sea Grill in the Kentlands, recalls his earliest memories of the family restaurant, they're not set in Gaithersburg or even its previous incarnation in Bethesda. Instead, he remembers picking up his grandmother and going to eat in the original O'Donnell's in the District.

"Downtown was a special place," Edelblut says, describing the first O'Donnell's as a "big restaurant" with "real architecture" and a "big menu."

He was 4-1/2 years old in 1956 when his mother opened the Bethesda restaurant. As a child, he typically ate dinner once or twice a week at O'Donnell's in Bethesda, and several times a month in the D.C. restaurant.

Edelblut's relationship with O'Donnell's is unique, he says, but customers remaining loyal to the restaurant across generations are not unusual. He says some early customers from the District would accompany their grown children and grandkids to the Bethesda restaurant after the families had moved out to Montgomery County.

"Now those parents from Bethesda are visiting their kids out in the Kentlands," he says.

To help encourage those kinds of connections, O'Donnell's offers customers a complementary cake for birthdays and anniversaries.



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“Over the generations, it has become known as the place to go,” Edelblut says.

To celebrate its own 10-year-anniversary in the Kentlands, O'Donnell's is seeking letters from customers describing a favorite memory from any of the three restaurants. A local celebrity will help select a winner, who will receive dinner for two once a month for a year.

The three most popular dishes at the restaurant are backfin crab, the Norfolk sampler and Chesapeake rockfish, Edelblut says. The O'Donnell's chef typically updates the menu every three to six months, but there are some things, such as the crab cakes, that aren't likely to disappear.

Also a perennial favorite are the Rum Buns, a sweet treat originally baked downtown. Today they are made fresh in an on-site bakery in the Kentlands. They're brought to the table, but also available to take home.

This month, O'Donnell's announced a 10th-anniversary fixed price menu that runs through October. The four-course chef's tasting menu offers appetizers, salad, entrée and dessert for \$30 per person.

Ten years may be cause to celebrate, but it's only a blip on the timeline of O'Donnell's. Edelblut's grandfather, Tom O'Donnell, opened the D.C. restaurant in 1922. He died in 1949, two years before Edelblut was born.

The original D.C. restaurant closed in 1980.

Edelblut began working in the Bethesda O'Donnell's as a teenager, taking on dishwasher and busboy jobs to make money.

“I played a lot of golf during the day and worked at night,” he says, noting that he toyed with the idea of turning pro. Even while studying business in college, he continuing to concentrate on golf because “I thought I wanted to do it for a living.”

After the Bethesda restaurant's general manager died, Edelblut and his mother discussed his returning to help out. He came on in 1970 as a kitchen supervisor. Early on, he reworked the menu to bring back more of his grandfather's recipes. After a couple of years in the kitchen, Edelblut moved onto the restaurant floor as night manager. Another four or five years later, he took over the restaurant.

O'Donnell's opened the Kentlands location a decade ago.

“I thought it would be a good location for us as the county began to move out,” he says, adding he’s pleased to be sitting in the middle of more than 3,000 houses. “It’s a very diverse neighborhood. It’s easy to walk to the restaurant from either the Kentlands or the Lakelands.”

O'Donnell's also attracts business from nearby employers such as MedImmune and the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

Since opening, O'Donnell's has closed in an outdoor porch, opened an outdoor patio and added an extra private dining room.

Also during that time, Edelblut closed the Bethesda O'Donnell's, which, he admits, was “a tough decision,” especially since he lives there.

It's a bit early to tell whether the next generation, his 3-month and 3-1/2-month-old grandchildren, will work in the family business as Edelblut, his mother, his grandparents and his daughters have. Still, chances are that O'Donnell's Sea Grill will continue to supply lifelong memories for area families.