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Firefly Grill gaining both Midwestern and national accolades

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The Firefly Grill in Effingham is gaining attention from Midwestern restaurant critics, as well as national magazines such as Bon Appetit and The Week, for its exquisite meals and eco-friendly efforts.

Owners Niall and Kristie Campbell first opened the restaurant at 1810 MidAmerica Drive in Effingham in 2006.

Why did the couple choose Effingham as a location?

Kristie, who was born in Effingham but grew up in Maine, has fond memories of the city. She remembers catching fireflies in her grandmother's yard as a child — thus, the name Firefly Grill. Her grandparents, the late Lowell and Lucille Samuel, lived in the city since 1940.

In the May 30, 2008, publication of The Week, the restaurant was mentioned as one of three memorable places to eat in the Midwest by Phil Vettel of the Chicago Tribune. The restaurant critic had written an article highlighting the Firefly in the paper's May 11 edition as well. In Bon Appetit, Firefly was recognized as No. 2 in February 2008 in terms of being environmentally friendly.

In December, St. Louis' www.riverfronttimes.com named the restaurant as having the second-best dish in the area for 2008. In "The Buzz," author Ian Froeb named "pretty much everything at the Firefly Grill" as the No. 2 dish.

While such positive recognition is always good, Chef Niall humbly said: "Most of our reward comes from the satisfaction of the community. Yes it's nice, but the truest success is seeing the families from the local communities making their way in."

Kristie said they will continue to involve the community by offering local products, while the local flavor will remain the grill's mission.

One rewarding aspect of serving the Effingham community is watching the kids grow up and get to try new foods, Kristie said.

She said some of their routine customers were expecting babies when they first started, and now the kids come out and enjoy feeding the coy and catfish on Lake Kristie.

Most of their customers come from a 60-mile radius, Niall said. He said they have some locals who come in several times a week; however, it's not unusual for someone to stroll in with their Bon Appetit or The Week magazine, he said.

About the restaurant

By offering variances in their American fresh and global comfort food daily menu, the couple have stayed on track in moving forward with their initial dreams at Firefly. There are no microwaves, which means no processed foods are served.

Serving healthy foods with fresh ingredients from their own herbal and vegetable garden is the main goal. Twelve varieties of tomatoes, 10 varieties of peppers, 10 varieties of squash blossoms and six different kinds of mint are just a few items available to the cooks.

"It's so fresh," Kristie said, "you can taste it in the food."

With each year, more home-grown products from area farmers are available in the kitchen, and the garden is continually expanding. Recently, they've added two area families to their supplier list, including one that raises trout south of Effingham and another that raises lamb.

With 65 employees, the two have seen little turnover in staff since the initial opening. Niall said he has had staff members say, "Where else can I go that will provide me with my own garden?"

While "going green" wasn't part of their initial plan, the Campbells say it just makes sense to be environmentally friendly. The building is made of recycled steel and has recycled tables and chairs. The outside is made from scrap wood from barns.

In addition, the restaurant has its own retention pond/lake for irrigation. All of the landscaping is native to the area. And being relatively new, everything is energy efficient, Niall said.

Menus and prices can be viewed daily on the Web site.

Weddings, rehearsal dinners, lobster bakes, wine tastings, live music events and book signings are some of the events that have been held there. Off-site catering for weddings and other events is available, as well.

In the summer, live music will be available weekly, coinciding with shows at the nearby Rosebud Theatre. While indoor seating capacity is 190 in the winter, both indoor and outdoor seating hits 300 in the summer. An enclosed heated glass patio area overlooks the restaurant's manmade Lake Kristie. Two other areas offer eating or lounging on the dock.

Firefly has a VIP room to house celebrities who may be performing at the Rosebud. Many times the celebrities will greet other diners, Kristie said.

About the owners

Kristie graduated with high honors from the University of Miami, earning degrees in biology and math. Prior to her debut in the restaurant industry, she worked as a trader for Fidelity Investments and managed accounts from as small as a couple of hundred thousand to several billion dollars.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, she took a leave of absence and traveled to Puerto Rico, where she met Niall. She chose to quit her job and stay in Puerto Rico. The couple married in 2004 in Maine.

The partnership allows for Kristie to serve as chief executive officer and for Niall to oversee the kitchen.

His experience as a chef includes success at a variety of restaurants in New England, Alaska, England, Puerto Rico and California. He began as a dishwasher at age 15 at a restaurant in Waterville, Maine. He learned quickly and became a chef there, he said.

Following that he was in charge of the kitchen at a lakeside resort in Maine. Because of the seasonal nature of the position, he was able to travel and take on a number of other positions to expand his culinary resume.

The Bread Box Cafe, Niall's first restaurant venture, was featured in Gourmet magazine.

Following this experience, in 2002 he opened the Blue Macaw in Puerto Rico, on the island of Vieques. It was highlighted as one of the top 100 places to eat worldwide by Conde Nast.

Making contacts from his many experiences allows the chef the ability to bring in items such as fresh fish from the West Coast. On a recent morning, Niall had spoken with someone who had organized a sturgeon hunt on the Columbia River in Oregon. The fish would be shipped to Effingham by 8 a.m. the next day.

The chef is living his dream.

"I love cooking food," he said. "That is basically what I do."

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