

Lent is one of the busiest seasons for restaurants that serve seafood



ROBERT K. YOSAY | VINDICATOR

Like many other restaurant owners, Nick Petrella of The Boulevard Tavern in Youngstown is gearing up for the Lenten season. The Boulevard Tavern will serve fish dinners on Ash Wednesday and every Friday during Lent.

Fishy Fridays

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YOUNGSTOWN

At 4:30 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon, Nick Petrella walks into the dining room at The Boulevard Tavern. He talks briefly with the few patrons gathered in booths enjoying the food from his kitchen. None are eating fish now, but Petrella knows that will change in about a week.

Though Petrella usually has no problem packing the house on an average Friday night, he also knows something else will change in about a week: Friday business at his restaurant will be booming.

The Lenten season begins Ash Wednesday, which falls on March 9 this year. For Eastern Orthodox Christians, it begins Monday.

For many Christians, Lent is a period of self-denial and reflection. Believers may sacrifice one object or habit for the 40 days leading up to Easter Sunday.

The tradition commemorates the 40 days and 40 nights Jesus spent in the wilderness preparing for his ministry.

Another common practice is abstaining from eating meat on Ash Wednesday and Fridays of Lent, and eating fish instead.

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NICK PETRELLA,
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For restaurants that serve seafood, it creates one of the busiest seasons of the year.

“It’s always busy here for Lent. It’s just a matter of how much busier... it fluctuates,” Petrella said.

Petrella said, on average, he goes through about one and a half times more fish during Lent than at other times of the year.

“It’s our Christmas season,” said Tim Hopkinson, owner of four Arthur Treacher’s Fish & Chips locations in the Valley.

His restaurants are in Austintown, Niles, Warren and Hermitage, Pa.

Though he usually sees a large uptick in business during the Lenten season, Hopkinson said a lot of factors can impact sales during Lent — including weather. Snow storms during last year’s season brought his sales down slightly.

“I suspect this year will be a very

good Lent because it’s a later Lent, and with later Lents, there is usually better weather,” Hopkinson said.

Ottavio Musumeci, owner and chef at Station Square in Liberty, doesn’t share that view.

“Because economic and gas prices and food costs are up, I think it’s going to be a little tough this year,” Musumeci said.

Musumeci still expects an increase in business during Lent, but because people will have less money to spend, he predicts this season might not be as busy as seasons past.

Matt Frampton, manager at the Guilford Lake Grill in Lisbon, said all holidays bring a boost in business. During Lent, the restaurant simply sells more fish.

He also said that while the restaurant gets a boost in business, he’s not sure if it’s because of Lent or because of the warmer weather that comes with spring.

“Because it’s a restaurant by a lake, spring is always our busy season,” Frampton said.

Lent has changed one thing at the restaurant: Frampton said the all-you-can-eat fish served on Fridays last year was such a hit that it never

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stopped offering the option. Some restaurant owners and managers said that their Lenten business has seen some impact from local churches and organizations offering fish fries of their own.

“We’ll have people who are here every Friday, and then, during Lent, we won’t see them. But I can’t blame them. They’re supporting their church,” Petrella said.

Hopkinson said his busi-

ness also has been affected by organizations and restaurants that typically don’t serve seafood cashing in on the season.

“We’ve been a fish restaurant for years, and suddenly all the major chains are becoming fish experts,” Hopkinson said.

Tami Jones, dining-room manager at the Youngstown Crab Co., said the competition hasn’t had an effect on the restaurant’s sales, which are up about 30 percent on Fridays during Lent.

“We still see an increase in business,” Jones said.

Donna Strickland, owner of Barney’s Deli in Canfield, also said she doesn’t feel the impact too much.

“This area is very permeated with creative restaurants. We are very lucky in that way. But any extra competition can always make things a little harder,” Strickland said.

Despite the extra competition, Strickland said she still see an uptick in business of about 25 percent during the Lenten season.

“My clientele is pretty loyal,” she said.