

Cookin' and Community at the Gypsy Grill in Maiden Rock

Tucked between the Great River Road and the railroad tracks in the heart of Maiden Rock—population 121—the Gypsy Grill lures visitors and local residents alike with good food, artsy atmosphere and small-town warmth.

In one front window, a colorful neon “We are cookin” sign greets visitors; in the other, a tambourine painted with the word “OPEN” invites people to come inside. Thursday through Sunday, the Gypsy Grill offers breakfast, lunch and dinner, and an inviting place for guests to relax, enjoy a cup of coffee or a glass of wine, and take in the sights or catch up with their neighbors. Live local music, such as popular folk duo Patchouli, is featured most Saturday nights.

Owners Judy Gibson and Rick Rice hail from Carver, Minnesota, a small town on the Minnesota River, southwest of the Twin Cities. They bought the building in March 2003 and opened Memorial Day weekend 2003. Prior to becoming restaurant owners, Rick was an architect for 30 years, including 10 years spent designing restaurants, and Judy was a business manager for an architectural firm. Neither had much restaurant experience—Judy’s parents had owned a restaurant and Rick had worked in a restaurant many years before.

Rick had a remodeling job in Stockholm and that’s when they discovered and fell in love with the area.

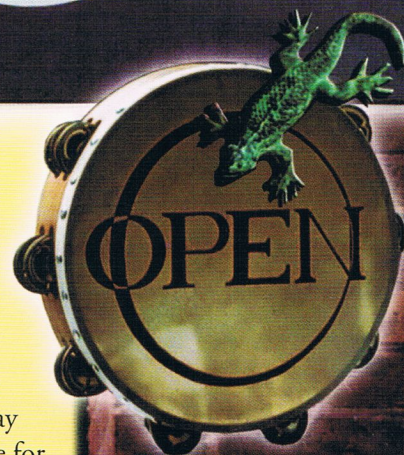
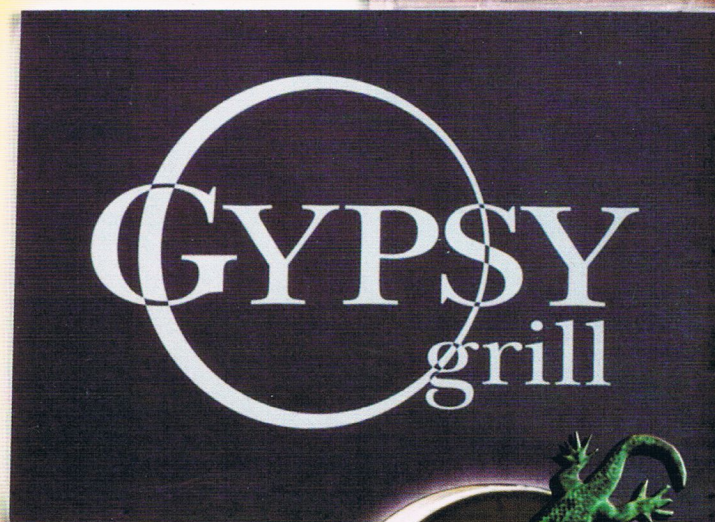
“The natural beauty and drama of the area inspires people. They’re drawn here,” Judy says.

She and Rick bought land outside of Maiden Rock two years ago “for retirement,” camped out and started scheming how to stay here. Designing restaurants, Rick says, gave him the idea that he could manage a restaurant. When the former Waterfront Cafe building in downtown Maiden Rock went up for sale, he and Judy saw their chance. Interior remodeling included tearing down a false ceiling, restoring the front windows to their original size and style, tearing up four layers of flooring to reveal beautiful hardwood, and removing wood paneling and plaster to expose the original brick walls.

Coming up with a name for the restaurant was easy. Camping out on their land in Maiden Rock, they called their stripped-down cooking facilities—a tripod over an open fire—their “gypsy grill.”

“We’ve always called ourselves gypsies—we like a whimsical, magical, eclectic feeling and wanted to bring it into the restaurant,” Judy says. “There’s so much motion here—river, trains, people going up and down the road...”

They have been told that the tracks behind the restaurant are the busiest stretch of railroad in the United States. The tracks are so close to the Gypsy



Story by Amy Martin Photography by Carmine Profant



*Gypsy Grill owners,
Rick Rice and Judy Gibson.*



*An inviting table
full of food and spirits*



Grill and other Maiden Rock businesses that when the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe cars go whizzing by, all conversation in the restaurant stops. “Zen time,” Judy says with a smile.

Rick says they were originally going to do a deli style restaurant to “feed people blowing through town.” But when they talked to people in the community, they realized that people wanted a place to sit down and relax, so they rethought the deli idea. After all, one tenet of the gypsy way is to make yourself at home wherever you are. Now, Rick says the Gypsy Grill has become a “community gathering place. It’s like I’ve got a huge family in here for breakfast— I know how people want their eggs done.”

They also apparently know how people want their surroundings “done.” The Gypsy Grill is open, sunny and spacious, with high ceilings, honey-colored hardwood floors, original artwork on the walls, and a stained glass window. In the winter, a woodburning stove keeps the cafe cozy and warm.

A lot of people have contributed to the Gypsy Grill’s Bohemian milieu, Judy says. Colorful tile mosaics on the tables and elsewhere are courtesy of the former owner, an artist. The booths are from the old Mud Pie restaurant in Minneapolis, the “We are cookin” sign is from a friend. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Gypsy Grill even has a resident ghost—a friendly female spirit. Judy and Rick have no idea who she is. She usually appears as a silhouette on the basement stairs.

A free-spirited sensibility is also evident in the Gypsy Grill’s food and beverage menus. Breakfast specialties include the Boxcar—a hash brown breakfast named by one of the customers—hash browns with bacon, ham, sausage, mushrooms, tomatoes, onions, green peppers and melted cheddar cheese served with two eggs any style, toast or English muffin for \$7.50. Or try the Veggie Boxcar with no meat, more veggies, at \$6.95. For lunch, panini sandwiches—the Beefy Gypsy (\$6.95) or Skinny Gypsy (\$6.50); and for dinner, the Pan-Fried Walleye Fillet (\$15.95) or hearty Lasagna with three cheeses and spinach at \$9.95. Also Steak & Shrimp for \$18.95 and Basil Pesto Fettuccine at \$10.95.

Complementing the generous and tempting entrees are rich brewed coffees from the espresso bar, a wine list featuring Castle Rock and Vampire wine (yes, it’s from Transylvania,) a variety of tasty vegetarian selections, and desserts from the Smiling Pelican Bakeshop just down the road.

A small sign bedecked with stars invites guests to “Dream a Little.” With welcoming smiles to warm the heart and good food to warm the belly, the Gypsy Grill makes it easy to do just that. ■

Just the Facts

The Gypsy Grill, W3531 Great River Road
Maiden Rock, WI 54750. (715) 448-4000.

Summer hours:

Thursday - Sunday 8 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Thursday - Saturday 5 - 9 p.m.