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# VIRTUAL

## Familiarity & Functionality:

### *A Winning Restaurant Combo at the Damariscotta River Grill*

By Thom Householder

Since its successful launch in late 2003, the Damariscotta River Grill ([www.damariscottarivergrill.com](http://www.damariscottarivergrill.com)) has firmly established itself as a welcome addition to the coastal Maine dining scene. Owned and operated by husband-and-wife team Rick Hirsch (Executive Chef) and Jean Kerrigan (General Manager), the popular restaurant is a favorite of locals, summer visitors and vacationing celebrities alike.

Developing new and exciting reasons for people to come through the door.

They call on lots of experience. Hirsch and Kerrigan have just celebrated another successful season at their other restaurant, the Anchor Inn Restaurant ([www.anchorinnrestaurant.com](http://www.anchorinnrestaurant.com)) in nearby Round Pond, Maine, which they've owned and operated for 20 years. Plus, the duo operates a successful catering business, Red Plate Catering ([www.redplatecatering.com](http://www.redplatecatering.com)). The variety of experience acquired through years of hard work certainly adds to the couple's solid understanding of what works for food customers, and what to avoid.

#### Building Familiarity

Offering a premium customer experience is the key to building loyalty among current customers, and consistently attracting new ones. Hirsch and Kerrigan define "customer experience" broadly:

"It begins when people think about the restaurant or pick up the phone to call us for directions or operating hours," notes Kerrigan, "and continues until they walk out our door after the meal to their cars. Were we courteous and helpful on the phone? Were we genuinely interested in them while they were dining with us, and did we do everything we could to make them feel welcome?"

Viral marketing – word of mouth – is critically important to a restaurant, and it cuts both ways, according to Hirsch. "Never lose sight of the fact that people will always tell friends and acquaintances about their experience," he advises. "If you realize that people are going to talk about you, make sure that you're always giving them something positive to talk about. Customers are the backbone of any food business, and you can't let them down. They'll tell others, and any negative word-of-mouth is really difficult to overcome."

The bottom line: Be attentive and interested in customers' experiences, show this attitude consistently, and give them a reason to be excited about coming back.

#### Being Innovative

For Hirsch and Kerrigan, this is where the fun stuff really happens; it's where they – and their staff – are constantly working to develop new ways to interact with customers and their surrounding community.



"At the Damariscotta River Grill, we're known for our regional, up-scale comfort food," Chef Rick Hirsch noted. "While there is a creative, fusion edge to some of our dishes, the uniqueness of our food is really our simplicity, using great ingredients we have here in Maine."

Hirsch and Kerrigan understand that developing and maintaining a balance between familiarity and innovation is what builds customer loyalty. Building the familiarity side of the equation means developing among guests the expectation that each time they return to the Damariscotta River Grill, they can rely on enjoying the same great dining experience. The innovation side of the equation means de-

# ROADTRIP

One of the most popular and successful ideas they've developed is the incredibly successful Damariscotta River Grill Wine Club, now beginning its third, active season. A natural outgrowth of the restaurant team's longtime involvement and interest in "all things wine" led them to regularly hosting a variety of established vintners from the U.S. and abroad during the Wine Club's monthly food and wine "classes." The popular Wine Club's membership only continues to grow, attracting members from all age brackets.

Many restaurants offer wine events, but at the Damariscotta River

and, his signature Thai Fish Stew, a coconut red curry broth served over pad Thai noodles, and loaded with fresh Maine fish, shrimp, scallops and mussels.

Chef Hirsch, a graduate of the prestigious Johnson & Wales University, has long been committed to buying local ingredients and supporting local farmers and producers, and this only adds to customers' overall experience at his restaurant. Each day and evening, he serves dishes featuring fresh Maine lobster, organic pork from Lubec, Maine's Old Sow Farm, and fresh oysters from such local suppliers as Pemaquid Oyster Company. The talented chef also offers patrons dishes which feature wild mushrooms from Oyster Creek Mushroom Company, lamb dishes from Maine's Hatch Town Farm, a variety of fresh organic produce.

"Offering satisfying experiences to dining rooms full of guests is so much more than the food on tables, no matter how tasty it might be," Hirsch adds. "Without guests feeling warm welcomed and valued, and without a genuine appreciation of your customer base and their preferences, you won't have tables full of happy diners for very long."



Grill Wine Club dinners, an interactive, rollicking good time is always enjoyed by all. Club members range from bona fide connoisseurs to folks new to the wine world, all of whom enjoy festive wine dinners at tables together under the knowing tutelage of sommelier Mark Guerin. He leads evenings with great humor and passion for his subject, fueled by the members' love of wine and food, and with a lively dose of socializing thrown in for good measure.

"We decided that we want our wine club dinners to be about the people in the room having fun first, and learning a thing or two about wine second," Kerrigan notes. "Enjoying good wine shouldn't be stiff, formal and intimidating. It should be an accessible and enjoyable evening for all of our guests. That's what we set out to do back when we initially formed the club, and based on the feedback we receive, we know we're on to something."

At the end of the day, the food coming out of any restaurant's kitchen is obviously central to the dining experience. The Damariscotta River Grill takes advantage of its location in Maine to stand out on this front.

The flavor-filled options on the chef's seasonal menus reflect this sensible mindset. Guests enjoy the restaurant's traditional Clam Chowder and its hearty Beef and White Bean Chili as much as its Maine Shrimp Bruschetta, fresh Lobster Cakes and succulent Pork Osso Buco. Other favorites include the chef's savory pan-fried Latkes topped with fresh apple chutney and sour cream; his tender Hanger Steak, served with bourbon-glazed onions and mushrooms;

## About Thom Householder:

Thom Householder and his wife, Jen Beltz, own Front Burner PR in Portland, Maine. The boutique PR agency specializes in the food and hospitality industry, working with independent restaurants, food-related publications, and food producers throughout the northeast, mid-Atlantic and southeast. ([www.frontburnerpr.com](http://www.frontburnerpr.com))

