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## Mendon: New England Steak and Seafood celebrates 60 years

MENDON - When John Quirk Sr. applied for a loan to open a restaurant on Rte. 16 in Mendon in 1954, he was denied by two of the largest banks in Milford: Milford Savings and Home National Bank.

"They said he would never make it in Mendon," said his son and current co-owner of New England Steak and Seafood, John Quirk Jr.

Both banks are long gone, Quirk said, "but we're still going strong after 60 years."

The restaurant first opened on April 17, 1956.

Now under the co-ownership of Quirk and his brother James Quirk, the restaurant is celebrating the historic years of success.

In the restaurant's lifetime, it has seen 11 different presidents, said John Quirk. Of those, one was "assassinated, one resigned and one almost impeached," he said of John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton.

Four years after opening, in 1960, the restaurant, along with Millie Mitchell's down the street (which was located where Alicante now is) obtained the first two liquor licenses in town after gathering signatures on a petition in what was a "dry town" at the time.

The restaurant has also had many additions and improvements since it first opened, but the eclectic decorations strewn about it are all original, including a 1961 champagne cork from the restaurant's first banquet, Quirk's grandfather's 1901 bicycle that he used to ride in Mendon parades and family photos and antiques.

Over the years, Quirk recalls several celebrities coming into the restaurant, including singer Tina Turner, the band Aerosmith, actor John Ratzenberger, actor Chuck Connors, children's show host Major Mudd and a performing monkey named Zip.

Quirk recalls that Zip, who visited in 1966, wore a tuxedo and bow-tie and had a shrimp cocktail for dinner.

He said he also remembers his father telling the members of Aerosmith to "cut their hair" and saying that Tina Turner "had nice legs."

One of Quirk's most vivid memories of the restaurant was from his first day of work in 1972 as a busboy.

"I was carrying platters of family-style spaghetti and meatballs downstairs to the banquet hall. I slipped and fell down the stairs. I was covered in spaghetti, meatballs and tomato sauce. My father took me outside and hosed me down. I worked in the kitchen ever since."

Quirk also remembers Aug. 9, 1974, when President Richard Nixon resigned.

"Dad opened two cases of champagne and started pouring it for everyone to celebrate," said Quirk.

He added, "Buddy Butler, the head of the Republican party in Mendon, walked out."

Some of the restaurant's regular customers have been coming "since the first day," Quirk said, and others used to "come here as little kids and now they're regular customers taking their own children here."

A restaurant reaching 60 is a rarity. Quirk said that 98 percent of new restaurants fail in their first year.

The secret to success, he said, is hard work and the strong relationship they have with the community.

New England Steak and Seafood stays connected by donating to Milford Regional Hospital, which it has done every year since it first opened.

"We can't give to everyone," said Quirk, "but we feel like if we give to Milford Regional, we're giving to everyone in the community."

Quirk said he also prides himself in the quality of the food he serves, specifically the steak and prime rib that is cut to order. The Andelman brothers, local food critics from the television show Phantom Gourmet, are regular customers and friends, he said. They have named the restaurant as one of the top five places to go for steak or prime rib.

At the moment, Quirk said he does not have any specific long-term goals for the restaurant.

"We're just going to keep doing what we're doing," he said, and "hope that we make it another 10 years."

Quirk said that his mother and father always used to say that owning a restaurant "was the biggest gamble a person could make, but sometimes it pays off."

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John Quirk Jr., right, and his brother James own New England Steak and Seafood, a Mendon landmark founded by their father, John Quirk, in 1956. In April, the restaurant celebrated its 60th anniversary. (Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Ken McGagh)

