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Growing Dutch

By Steve Slosarek

Middlebury's Das Dutchman Essenhaus continues to broaden its appeal, even as droves already can be depended upon to arrive.



STEVE SLOSAREK

Time seems to stand still at Das Dutchman Essenhaus,

a tranquil respite in the Amish countryside of northern Indiana that magically makes the busy world go away within an instant of setting foot on the grounds.

Serving authentic Amish- and Mennonite-style recipes, Essenhaus has been soothing food-loving customers since 1971, ranking as the largest restaurant in Indiana, with a seating capacity of more than 1,100. The downhome cooking and friendly atmosphere draw visitors from hundreds of miles. During a recent visit, license plates identified those from 21 states across the Midwest, East Coast and Southwest.

Ah, but these patrons are experiencing an optical illusion. Time doesn't stand still at Essenhaus, which has transformed from its origin as just a restaurant in Middlebury, Ind., to a sprawling, well-manicured 120-acre property that includes a resplendent inn and conference center, charming shops, theater hall, bakery, miniature golf, bike rentals, children's play area, horse-drawn carriage rides and groomed grounds featuring paved walking paths, blossoming gardens, peaceful ponds and a covered bridge.

Das Dutchman Essenhaus is constantly evolving, with improvements or additions made annually.

Building Upon Success Perhaps the frozen-in-time perception originates from the kitchen, which has produced from-scratch, comfort-food staples for decades. You can't improve perfection, so why try? The homemade noodles, made in an Essenhaus factory across the street, are exquisite. So are the broasted chicken, mashed

potatoes with gravy, stuffing, roast turkey, bread and the like. The succulent shredded roast beef always is a highlight. Diners have three ways to order—off the menu; family-style, where the portions are refilled by a server; or all-you-can-eat buffet.

The more than 30 varieties of pie are legendary, especially the lushly substantial butterscotch, popular peanut butter or smooth red raspberry cream, all topped with a thick layer of real whipped cream. One lucky party can eat in an Amish buggy within the multiroom restaurant.

But owners Bob and Sue Miller had a vision beyond an eatery, with adjoining corridors and rooms filled with shopping opportunities for quality knickknacks and souvenirs.

By the 1980s, they opened a retail home-style bakery in the restaurant building featuring cakes, cookies and huge doughnuts, including those frosted and then filled with toothsome custard-like Bavarian cream. The Essenhaus Village Shops—six distinctive gift shops located in original Amish farm buildings or log cabins—followed for an ideal way to walk off dinner.

The inn and conference center came next, with 88 generously sized guestrooms with quilt- and country-craft-themed decor, comfortable open spaces, indoor swimming pool and game room, memorable complimentary breakfast and even two huge cookie jars near the front desk tempting those who like things sweet and free. The nearby Dawdy



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DAS DUTCHMAN ESSENHAUS



STEVE SLOSAREK

A plateful of comfort food and a pie menu (above left) prove tempting. Flowers fill a wagon (top) sitting in front of the village shops. Along with 5,000-plus blooms, a Seward Johnson bronze sculpture (above) graces the flower garden.

New for 2017 Continuing the destination's penchant for improving and expanding, the following are part of Das Dutchman Essenhaus this year:

- A Seward Johnson bronze sculpture at the 5,000-plus-bloom living flower garden, part of the Quilt Gardens Along the Heritage Trail Tour in Elkhart County.
- A bakery remodel that includes expanded merchandise space, a well-appointed and spacious bistro seating area featuring a glowing fireplace and the introduction of fried pies. A "long john cutting" of an 8-foot-long doughnut replaced the traditional ribbon cutting on opening day.
- An adorably cute outdoor display of cows that accentuates the green spaces between the Essenhaus Village Shops. A public naming contest in 2017 for the five life-size and lifelike faux cows produced the names Milkdud, Sir Loin and Bessenhaus, among others.
- The Essenhaus Connector Trail, featuring 10-foot-wide, new-terrain asphalt. The trail connects to the county's Ridge Run Trail, which extends to the Pumpkinvine Nature Trail. The new connector trail accentuates Essenhaus' established three-quarter-mile walking path.

- A half-dozen new menu items, including fully loaded macaroni and cheese and a crispy pork fritter wrap as well as gluten-free items at breakfast, lunch, dinner and dessert.

So, while Das Dutchman Essenhaus is a serene, relaxing place for visitors, workers and planners are always busy behind the scenes. Time will never stand still for them.

For more information, call (800) 455-9471 or visit essenhaus.com. For trip-planning assistance, contact your local AAA office or visit AAA.com/travel. **H&A**

Steve Slosarek is a freelance writer from Carmel, Ind.

Haus Inn, with seven standard rooms, was renovated from an Amish grandparents house to an ideal lodging option for family reunions or small groups. It connects to the common areas of the inn and conference center.

The 1990s ushered in an 18-hole miniature golf course as well as hand-dipped ice cream options, a well-constructed covered bridge, children's play area, bike rental and carriage rides. Five years ago, Essenhaus Heritage Hall opened with a seating capacity of 160 for live theatrical and musical performances. Essenhaus' mission is to stage performances that are enriching, hopeful and suitable for the entire family. For instance, a 2017 performance of *Mail Order Bride* was a comedy with an infusion of Christian values.

Recent years have seen the addition of special events, including a classic car cruise-in on Thursdays through September, fall fashion show in late October, Tour of Trees in November and holiday-themed theater in December.