Best of Oxford

AJAX DINER
Best of the Best

THE OXFORD EAGLE
Friday, June 4, 2010
Voters determine who’s the best

Democracy is alive and well in Oxford.
That’s one of the conclusions that can be drawn from the results of The Oxford EAGLE’s 2010 Best of Oxford contest.
Even though the number of Best-of categories were thinned this year, voters still came out in droves — especially when it came to online voting. For the first time in the six consecutive years we’ve conducted this popularity contest, online voters topped the 1,000 mark.
Perhaps it was The EAGLE’s snazzy new website — if you can forgive a little shameless self-promotion — that increased the participation of online voters. Or it may be that with each passing year, more of our readers are getting more comfortable participating in web-based forums.
More than likely, however, is that what’s driving many of the people to vote in the Best of Oxford contest is the quality of the candidates — especially when it comes to businesses.
Given the difficult economic times we’ve struggled through the past couple of years, those businesses that have been around for a few years and yet still continue to provide a service valued by their customers during a recession, obviously have a loyal following.
These businesses have managed to find a way to adapt to the changing economy and retain their customer base. And one way customers can show their appreciation to these businesses is by casting a ballot in the Best of Oxford contest that identifies the business as the best in its category.
As always, many of the races were close. Some winners from previous contests won their category again, while other categories had some who had come close to winning before, finally come out on top.
Our congratulations go out to the winners and the near-misses, as well as all the voters who cast a ballot. We look forward to your participation in the 2011 Best of Oxford contest!
— Jonathan Scott

And the winners are ...

As we’ve done in year’s past, we like to reward those who take the time to submit a ballot in our annual Best of Oxford contest. We randomly pick the name of one person who submitted a ballot via the Internet and another who submitted a paper ballot. Each one gets a $50 gift certificate to one of the winning businesses. This year’s winners are Ellen Leppa (Internet voter) and Donna Pickens (paper-ballot voter). Congratulations!

Highlights

Best of the Best – Ajax Diner
Best Local Band – One Mile South
Best Bartender – Spencer Posecai
Best Oxford-themed Website - EAGLE

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Best Oxford-themed Website - EAGLE

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Best Kept Secret – The Book Nook
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BAR
City Grocery
The Library, Rib Cage, Roosters, Snackbar, Frank and Marlee's, Parrish's, Proud Larry's, Blind Pig, Funky's, The Lyric, Downtown Grill, Irie, Bouré, Taylor's Pub, The Cellar, Two Stick, Burgundy Room, Red House, Illusions, Waltz, Ajax, Murff's

BARBECUE
Handy Andy
Rib Cage, B's BBQ, Applebees, Dixieland, Bette Davis, Ajax

BAKERY
Bottletree Bakery
Honeybee Bakery, Emileighs, Kroger, Honest Abe's, Shipley, Lusa, Holli's Sweet Tooth

BREAKFAST
Big Bad Breakfast
Bottletree Bakery, Honeybee Bakery, Beacon, Huddle House, McDonald's, Lindsey's Chevron, Chick-Fil-A, Handy Andy

BUFFET
Chow Time
China Royale, Bofield's, Pizza Hut, New Hunan, Mama Jo's, Larson's Big Star, Lenora's, The Inn at Ole Miss, Oxford University Club

CASUAL DINING
Ajax
Snackbar, Bouré, Volta Tavera, Oby's, Phillip's Grocery, Proud Larry's, Beacon, Newk's, Rooster's, Lenora's, Varsity Grill, Tequila's, Chili's, Fat Cats, Old Venice, Downtown Grill, Waltz, Applebee's, Huddle House, Kabuki, Tallulah's Kitchen, Bofield's, Abner's

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CATFISH
Taylor Grocery

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DELI
Newk’s

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CHICKEN
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Emileigh’s

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Ajax Diner voted Best of the Best for 2010

BY MELANIE ADDINGTON
Staff Writer

Randy Yates is no stranger to being voted the best. As the first employee of City Grocery, he was twice elected Best Bartender during an earlier incarnation of the Best of Oxford contest when it was sponsored by The Oxford EAGLE's Oxford Town.

After moving to Oxford in 1991, he was hired by John Currence and Palmer Adams as bar manager for the new City Grocery. When it opened for lunch in 1994, he and Amy Crockett were the managers running lunch. That was the beginning of what led to a long and fruitful relationship with Crockett and Ajax Diner.

The current location of Ajax was a place called N'awlins Cafe. Yates interviewed there for a manager's job and instead asked the owner if he wanted to sell it. Currence and Yates bought it to create a place where they could serve barbecue and plate lunches and have a beer.

“We had done Mexican, Greek and Cajun-French, or whatever you would call The Grocery, and Amy and I are from Mississippi so we decided to do the food we grew up on,” Yates said. “Amy has been the head cook and kitchen manager since the day we opened, and we used recipes from our moms and Grandmas, and from our favorite restaurants.”

Crockett and Yates bought out Currence’s ownership in Ajax. The two decide together what will be on the menu any given day.

“When we opened we had lobster, grouper cheeks, oyster shooters, barbecue and steaks,” Yates said. “Everyone wanted the plate lunches and hamburgers. It has evolved over the years to the point it’s hard to change the menu anymore.”

The most popular items served today are the same ones that were popular shortly after Ajax first opened: catfish, burgers, chicken and dumplings, sweet potato casserole, mac and cheese, butter beans and squash casserole, Yates said.

“We opened on Oct. 22, 1997, right in the middle of football season,” Crockett said. “The decor, a mish mash of folk art and old license plates alongside the checkered tablecloths and year-round Christmas lights, makes Ajax’s patrons feel at home as soon as they enter.

“Ajax is named after my grandfather, A.J. Yates,” Yates said. “His college nickname was ‘Ajax.’ He was the house steward at the SAE house at Auburn, and he loved to brag about how everyone loved his food. He had a cabin at the Neshoba County Fair, and he loved to entertain people. I guess at lot of the decor (of Ajax), and inspiration comes from that.”

But it’s neither just the food nor the decor that makes Ajax Diner the Best of the Best, according to voters in the 2010 Best of Oxford contest. It’s also the work atmosphere that Crockett and Yates generate for their employees.

“I guess what makes it ‘special’ is that Amy and I have worked our way up the ladder, and we have a lot of empathy for how hard of a job our employees have,” Yates said.

“I work with the nicest, funniest, most hard working people. They are truly our family. We have three employees from North Mississippi Regional Center and they really bring a lot of light to the job. They love everybody there. We were named their employer of the year one year.

“But the best (honor) has been being elected Oxford’s Best Lunch every year. Being voted by your customers to me means everything.”

—melanie@oxfordeagle.com
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FINE DINING
City Grocery
208, Ajax, Bouré, Downtown Grill, Lenora's, Old Venice, Oxford University Club, Prime, Ravine, Snackbar, Waltz, Yocona

FRENCH FRIES
McDonald's
Sonic, Chick-Fil-A, Red House, Wendy's, Proud Larry's, Handy Andy, Backyard Burgers, Snackbar, Oby's, Beacon, Volta, Phillip's Grocery, Ajax, Zaxby's, Abner's, Bouré, Rooster's

HAMBURGERS
Phillips Grocery
Backyard Burger, Wing Fanatic, Handy Andy, Red House, Wendy's, Sonic, McDonald's, Bouré, Beacon, Burger King, Snackbar, Ajax, Taylor's Pub, Chili's, Proud Larry's, Roosters, 208, LB's Meat Market, Waltz

HAPPY HOUR
Rooster’s
Taylor's Pub, City Grocery, Volta Taverna, Burgundy Room, Snackbar, Frank and Marlee's, Sonic, Parrish's, Bouré, Proud Larry's, Chili's, Irie, The Library, The Blind Pig, Waltz, Two Stick, Old Venice, Downtown Grill, Red House

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One Mile South named Best Local Band

By Meredith McGregor
EAGLE Contributor

In a town known for its many talented musicians and top-notch bands, getting named Best Local Band in the 2010 Best of Oxford contest is a huge honor for the guys of One Mile South.

“We are completely honored to be chosen as the Best Local Band in Oxford,” said Will Nelson, who provides lead vocals in the band.

He and his bandmates were born and raised in Oxford.

The other members of the band are Chad Ferguson on guitar, Jesse Pinion on lead guitar, Griffin Forsyth on bass and Mike Logan on drums.

And while sound technician Joe Coleman may not play an instrument, the band members consider him the sixth member of the group due to his invaluable talent on the sound board at each performance.

One Mile South formed about a year and a half ago and since then, the band has been filling local venues and entertaining crowds across Mississippi.

The band had the privilege of opening for Justin Moore at the Lyric Theater recently and they are gaining recognition for their relentless drive and serious talent during their live performances.

“It’s all about passion,” Nelson said.

“We wouldn’t change this experience for anything.”

The guys have worked hard over the past year to establish themselves as musicians and hone their sound, which is considered unique compared to the many other local bands in town. Their music blends a wide range of genres, such as country, classic rock and a touch of blues.

A great deal of their inspiration comes from musicians such as Eric Church and the late, great Jimi Hendrix.

One Mile South serves up covers from a multitude of bands and musicians as well as a plethora of original tunes.

“Whether they admit it or not, everyone loves country music because it’s something you can dance to,” Forsyth said. “We really just want people to have a good time when they come out to hear us. That’s what it’s all about.”

The main goal for the band is a record deal, and given its rapid success and loyal fan base, that goal may well be within reach.

“All we need is time to polish and perfect our original tracks,” Nelson said.

Those who haven’t yet had the pleasure of hearing One Mile South need to check out Oxford Town, the community’s weekly entertainment guide, in the coming weeks. The band is busy booking gigs in local venues in the coming months.

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McAlister’s
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TREAT SHOP/CANDY STORE
Holli’s Sweet Tooth
Chaney’s, The Chocolate Bar, Emileigh’s, Honeybee Bakery, Sno Biz

BEST RESTAURANT
City Grocery
208, Two Stick, Ajax, Beacon, Big Bad Breakfast, Bouré, Chili’s, Downtown Grill, Fat Cat’s, Irie, Kabuki, Lenora’s, Nagoya, Newk’s, Oby’s, Old Venice, Proud Larry’s, Ravine, Rooster’s, Snackbar, Taylor Grocery, Tequilas, Volta Taverna, Waltz, Yocona, Oby’s
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The Lyric Oxford
Double Decker, Rooster’s, Proud Larry’s, Music in the Hall, Taylor’s Pub

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One Mile South
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NEWSPAPER COLUMNIST
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Alyssa Schnugg, Charlotte Jefferies Dicus, Melanie Addington, Jim Dees, John Davis, Jimmy Reed, Jon Scott, Lucy Schultze, Rick Hynum, Steven Godfrey, J.B. Clark

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**Prime A Steakhouse**
Bartender treats customers like friends

BY ALYSSA SCHNUG
Staff Writer

Spencer Posecai is no stranger to working in the food and beverage business.
At 14 years old, he started working in the kitchen at his family-owned Posecai’s Restaurant in Greenville.
“I worked in the kitchen until I was 21 years old,” said Posecai, now 26. “I decided I didn’t want to be in the kitchen anymore.”

After Posecai left home in the Delta to attend the University of Mississippi, he got a job working for John Currence at Bouré on the Square.
After a couple years of working in the kitchen and waiting tables, Posecai was asked if he’d like to learn how to be a bartender.
“It’s like being paid to have fun,” Posecai said.

After Currence opened Snackbar at 721 N. Lamar Blvd., Posecai moved over to the new restaurant where he works as bartender and part-time manager. Snackbar’s oyster bar opens at 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 3:30 p.m. on Saturdays. It stays open until midnight Monday through Wednesday and Saturday and until 1 a.m. Thursday and Friday.

Serving drinks wasn’t as easy as it appeared and required a fair amount of skill.
“Memorizing all the drinks was a challenge,” he said. “And being able to make them fast so people don’t have to wait.”

Posecai caught on quickly when it came to how to mix a drink. But more important than the technical skills he learned were the people skills, which are probably the most valuable skills needed by the best mixologists.

“I deal with people well,” he said when asked why he thought he won the Best Bartender award in the 2010 Best of Oxford contest. “And I always smile.”

Posecai said his customers, especially the ones who drop in frequently, are more like his friends, and he treats them like friends — which is probably another reason he’s developed a long list of loyal fans in a relatively short period of time.

“Some people just want to come and talk to a friend,” he said. “I feel like our regular customers are our friends and I treat them like I’m on the other side of the bar with them.”

While he’s attending Ole Miss and working on a degree in marketing and human resources, Posecai said he expects to stay in the restaurant business after he graduates.

“I don’t know if I’ll always be a bartender, but I’m pretty sure I will be stay in the restaurant business in some way.”

Like the popular 1980s television show, “Cheers,” Posecai said it’s important for bartenders to learn their customers’ names and drinks.

“It makes people feel special and makes them want to come to your place more often when they have that sense of ‘home,’” he said. “You know, when you go somewhere ‘where everyone knows your name.’”

Currence said he’s proud of his bartender.
“We spend a tremendous amount of energy trying to perfect our craft and our service at all of our restaurants,” he said. “The fact that Spencer was recognized as Best Bartender is magnificent. He’s a super guy that loves nothing more than the time he spends with the guests at the restaurant. He seems to really shine when he’s put on stage.”

The Snackbar also won Best New Restaurant. Currence’s other restaurants won: Best Restaurant, Fine Dining and Best Bar, City Grocery; and Best Breakfast, Big Bad Breakfast. Also, Currence was named Best Chef.

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It was a long time coming — but well worth the wait.

The Oxford EAGLE’s all-new website, oxfordeagle.com, was named Best Oxford-themed Website in 2010 Best of Oxford voting.

— A community calendar featuring cultural events, club meetings and other things to look forward to. Got an upcoming event of your own? Submit it through our simple online form.
— Photo galleries, featuring far more images than we’re able to publish in our print edition. Browse galleries, watch slideshows and purchase prints for your own collection.
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Paws for Art, an event which raises funds for the Oxford-Lafayette Humane Society, was the top vote-getter for Best Charity Event.

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Being the best law firm means knowing when to listen

BY ALYSSA SCHNUGG
Staff Writer

After working at the Tollison Law Firm for several years, attorney Rhea Tannehill decided in 2003 it was time to go hang out his own shingle.

He worked alone for a year before he was joined by attorney Jay Carmean, who had worked alongside Tannehill at the Tollison firm.

“Rhea took me under his wing and really taught me how to practice criminal and personal injury law,” Carmean said about his partner.

The partnership clicked, and in a small town full of lawyers, Carmean and Tannehill have carved out a niche for themselves. The firm won this year’s award for Best Law Firm.

Carmean credits his staff and fellow attorneys and their knack for treating clients with consideration for winning the award.

“When someone is coming to see us, it generally means they’re not having a good day,” he said. “The staff we have right now — from the receptionist to the paralegal to the runner — is the best we’ve ever had. They deal with the clients on a daily basis a lot more than (the attorneys) do.”

Attorney Matt McKenzie joined the firm in 2006. Edward “Josh” Bogen Jr., senior partner in the law firm of McGee and Bogen in Leland, serves as of counsel for Tannehill and Carmean.

While the firm still has a heavy emphasis on personal injury and civil and criminal trial work, they also extend the reach of their practice into a variety of other fields, including wrongful death; worker’s compensation; divorce; real estate; wills and estates; litigation; motor vehicle accidents; casino liability and debt collection.

“The No. 1 important thing is communication,” Carmean said. “I’ve seen other lawyers who might do a good job with a case, but they don’t stay in contact with the client or have an open-door policy. The client might be happy with the outcome, but they aren’t happy with the attorney.”

The firm has nine full-time employees — including the attorneys, and three part-time employees.

Last year, Carmean found himself without his partner when Tannehill, who was out of town this week when Carmean spoke with The EAGLE, was deployed overseas in Afghanistan as a Judge Advocate General officer in the 168th EN BDE of the Mississippi Army National Guard, where he’s a legal advisor to his commander, prosecutes soldiers who are charged with a crime and assists other soldiers with legal issues as they arise while in service. He spent nearly a year away from Oxford, his family and his law firm.

“So we’re even,” he added with a chuckle.

To contact the Tannehill & Carmean law firm, call 236-9996.

—alyssa@oxfordeagle.com

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Pssst! Want to know Oxford’s Best Kept Secret?

For book lovers, there’s one little nook in Oxford to keep your eye on. You never know what new treasures can be discovered at the Book Nook, the Staton family’s used book store in the Depot Antique Mall at 709 N. Lamar Blvd.

Hidden away within the mall, it’s easy to see why bibliophiles have been trying to keep this gem amongst themselves as the Best Kept Secret in Oxford. With its shelves crammed with a wide assortment of used books — ranging from new mysteries to a well-worn history of art — the Book Nook has a book for everyone. Most of the used books are in near perfect condition and, of course, more affordable than buying new.

“It is a labor of love,” said Carolyn Staton, one of the owners of the book store.

Staton, known by most as the former provost at the University of Mississippi, is also well known for her love of buying books. There isn’t a yard sale in town that doesn’t get a visit from Staton if she suspects books may be sold there.

“I try to find books that people will read or are unusual and can’t find too often,” Staton said. “I go to library sales and yard sales, and find books in a reasonable condition and keep the prices real low.”

The store began for a simple reason: space.

“My husband and I both had huge libraries. We had so many we couldn’t keep them, we couldn’t build any more bookcases,” Staton said. “So we had this booth at the Depot Antique Mall and started selling the books. There seemed to be a niche for it. I loved to buy books, but I didn’t need to buy them for me anymore. So now I get to buy them and get them to the people who need them.”

Book Nook opened 10 years ago, but it became a sizable store around four years ago.

Since her retirement in 2008, Staton has been focusing on the book store full-time, even traveling to estate sales to acquire new items.

“I am at an estate sale right now in Dallas,” Staton said by phone last week. “I am probably going to buy a hundred books here. It has truly grown. By the time we bring home what we buy in Texas, we will have to expand again.”

Staton said being able to focus on the books has been rewarding and that her aim is to ensure the store has an inviting atmosphere that makes people feel comfortable coming in to buy or just to browse.

The store is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sunday.

Her husband, who’s still a math professor at the university, makes his own personal contributions to the store as well.

“We have a large selection of math books,” Staton said.

—melanie@oxfordeagle.com
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Lenora’s favorite ‘new addition’

BY LUCY SCHULTZE
Senior Staff Writer

Take all the cozy comfort of eating at your family table, subtract the trouble of cooking and cleaning up, and add a spark of creative style.

What you’ve got is exactly what Mike Portera was shooting for when he opened Lenora’s Southern Bistro this past August.

“I wanted a place in Oxford where you could actually go and have a conversation, even if it’s jam-packed,” he says. “I wanted it to be like you’re coming home to eat — a real warm and cozy place that serves good food in a casual atmosphere.”

It’s a theme local diners have embraced, selecting Lenora’s as Oxford’s Best New Addition on The Oxford EAGLE’s 2010 Best of Oxford ballot.

Located just north of the Square in the former home of another local favorite — L&M’s Kitchen and Salumeria — Lenora’s serves up lunch and dinner on Tuesdays through Saturdays, in addition to hosting a popular Sunday brunch buffet.

“Sunday brunch is something I always wanted to do,” Portera says. “I remember as a kid going to church and coming back to have Sunday dinner as a family. In this day and age, it’s kind of hard to sit down and eat as a family, so this is a way to make that possible for more families.”

A native of Greenville, Portera worked in the pharmaceutical and real-estate industries before becoming a restaurateur. His staff of about 30 full- and part-time employees is led by general manager Terry Moon and chefs Dustin Little and Daniel Russell.

Among favorites on the menu are such treats as the artichoke bottoms appetizer and the pan-fried jumbo lump crab cakes.

“I had a lady in here from Maryland — where crab cakes are a specialty — tell us ours are some of the best in the world,” Portera says.

The restaurant’s decor carries out the Southern-casual theme, complete with an interior mural by Oxford artist Anne Scott Barrett that sweeps over Delta-area landmarks from the Civil War battlefield at Vicksburg to the Peabody Hotel in Memphis. Soft drinks are served in mason jars, and bright Merimekko fabrics set a lighthearted tone that starts at the front door.

As Lenora’s approaches its one-year anniversary, Portera says he couldn’t be happier with the reception it’s enjoyed.

“The people in Oxford have embraced Lenora’s,” he says. “I love meeting them, and some people come in here two and three times a week. Everyone has treated me and my staff so well. We’re really blessed.”

—lucy@oxfordeagle.com
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