



## THE DETROIT FREE PRESS RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR 2001

the

BY SYLVIA RECTOR | FREE PRESS RESTAURANT CRITIC

It was never a sure thing.

You might even say the odds were against David Pendy and Michael Connery when they left their Bloomfield Hills Country Club jobs last year to return to the east side, where they had grown up, and open their first restaurant.

Not only do Grosse Pointes residents have a reputation for being conservative with their dining dollars, the fledgling owners were opening in a spot where a long line of restaurants had struggled and closed over the years.

But the Hill Seafood & Chop House has turned into a hit in the hard-to-please Pointes, and its success seems largely the result of the hometown boys' simple, common-sense approach: Cater to the tastes and temperaments of the customer.

Dining out has become such an integral part of our lives that what many of us long for in a restaurant — besides excellent food, service and value — is a place that feels like our own, whether we're celebrating an anniversary, lunching with friends or having dinner with a client. Crafting a menu, an atmosphere and a setting that will give guests that feeling has been Pendy and Connery's first priority.

For the customer-focused philosophy reflected in its cuisine, service and atmosphere, the Hill Seafood & Chop House in Grosse Pointe Farms has been named the Detroit Free Press Restaurant of the Year 2001.

THE HILL'S STORY, PAGE 4F



### PICTURES OF SUCCESS

Top: The Hill Seafood & Chop House has several seafood entrees on its daily menu, including the grilled center-cut filet of Black Island swordfish, finished with cheese butter.

Upper right: Owners Michael Connery, left, and David Pendy are native east sider.

Right: From the furnishings to the fare, the emphasis is on making patrons feel comfortable and catered to.



## NEW! TOP TABLES 2001

When the occasion is special and everything has to be just right, where do you dine?

The Detroit Free Press today names its first list of Top Tables, the 10 restaurants that we believe represent the area's best and most memorable dining experiences.

Each is unique. Each pleases and impresses for different reasons — as you'll see and read on Page 8F. In alphabetical order, they are:

**CAFE BON HOMME,**  
Plymouth

**CHARLEY'S CRAB,**  
Troy

**EMILY'S,**  
Northville

**IL POSTO RISTORANTE,**  
Southfield

**THE LARK,**  
West Bloomfield

**OPUS ONE,**  
Detroit

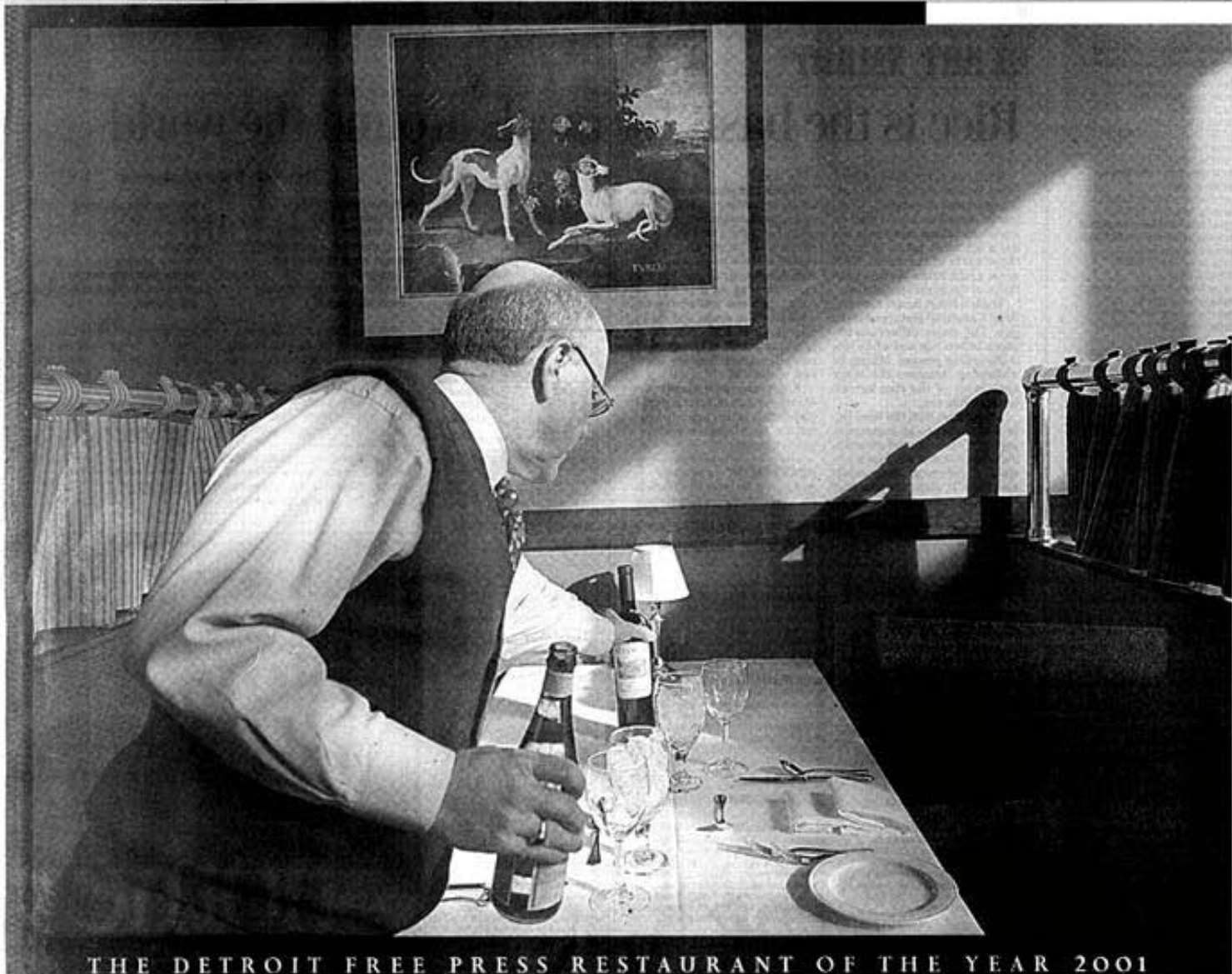
**THE RATTLESNAKE CLUB,**  
Detroit

**THE RITZ-CARLTON GRILL,**  
Dearborn

**TRIBUTE,**  
Farmington Hills

**THE WHITNEY,**  
Detroit





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**ALL IN THE SETTING**

*Above: Manager David Wilkes sets up a table. The many booths inside the Hill give it a more relaxed feeling.*

*Below: The restaurant also serves lunch on weekdays, and there's plenty of casual fare on the menu.*

the

Story by Sylvia Rector

Free Press Restaurant Critic

From top to bottom, it's designed to appeal to its customers. The look is upscale but not ostentatious, more old money than high fashion.

It feels a bit clubby, but welcoming — not only because so many folks know each other, but also because co-owner David Pandy is usually strolling through the room, saying hello to guests he doesn't know, as well as those he does.

And it serves excellent traditional American cuisine — the type of food that he and executive chef Michael Connery, the other owner, think their local audience prefers.

They should know; they're native east siders who left Oakland County last year to open their first restaurant on their home turf.

The Hill Seafood & Chop House in Grosse Pointe Farms, named as the Detroit Free Press 2001 Restaurant of the Year, doesn't pretend to be a trendsetter, a magnet for celebrities or an altar to haute cuisine.

Its objectives are very different.

At a time when we're eating more meals than ever in restaurants, the Hill aspires to be what many of us long for but too seldom find: a spot close to home that you can count on for excellent food, fine service, great atmosphere and a smile at the door. Even the prices aren't bad.

No matter where you live in metro Detroit, it's the kind of place you wish would open right around the corner.

**Once inside**

A fireplace crackles brightly between the casual bar and the sage-green dining room, where framed paintings of hunting and nautical scenes decorate the walls.

Brass accents, polished woodwork and tasteful patterned carpeting give the bi-level room a well-heeled feel. Old clothbound books are displayed casually on a high shelf above a row of booths; candlelight flickers on the tabletops.

It's just a weeknight, but the dining room is filled with a lively collection of people and purposes.

A well-dressed older couple celebrating their anniversary ask the waitress to snap their picture. At a table in the middle of the room,



Photos by Susan Tusa | Detroit Free Press

Please see THE HILL, Page 5F



THE DETROIT FREE PRESS RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR 2001

THE HILL, from Page 4F

some 20-somethings spot friends coming in and scoot their chairs over to make room. Nearby, a mother and daughter are dining here for the second time in a week.

Settle down in a big booth by the wall to read one of the crisp, oversized menus and you can't help but notice the emphasis on premium ingredients and classic dishes.

The seafood — the heart of the menu — comes from Foley's of Boston, known for its quality, and the freshwater fish comes from local purveyors, the menu boasts. The strip steaks are USDA prime. The veal is premium Provim. The Irish Mist smoked salmon is cured in-house. In fact, practically everything — stocks, dressings, bread and desserts — are made in the Hill's kitchen.

"Our concept was to have a great piece of fish, a great steak, a great chop, delivered with value," Penty says, emphasizing value.

To Pointes residents, value isn't the same thing as quantity, he says, speaking with the authority that comes from having grown up in Grosse Pointe Shores.

"It's the type of food," he says, "and the accompaniments. And a good drink is another thing that's perceived as value. Value means not being nickle-and-dimed."

So entrees come with soup or salad plus an appropriate starch and fresh vegetable. Freshly baked bread and a dish of Great Northern bean salad — the kind Joe Murr's used to serve — are delivered to every table.

Penty says his customers loved the old restaurant in Detroit and still miss it; he makes no apology for trying to fill some of that void.

The other element that's crucial for success, Penty says, is having an owner on premises — and visible. That way, customers know someone's keeping an eye on things. And they like seeing a familiar face.

"When people come in, they're greeted at the door. There's always someone there, and usually it's me ... They say, 'Can Michael do that New York au poivre that he did last week?'"

Back to the east side

Look and listen, and it becomes clear that every choice Penty and Connerly have made — from the color of the walls to the specific items on the menu — has been dictated by what they believe Pointes diners want and expect.

The customer-focused philosophy comes easily. Both have spent most of their careers in private clubs, where customers expect top service and personal attention. And the owners see to it that their staff delivers it.

Before opening the Hill in August, Penty, 40, was general manager of the prestigious Bloomfield Hills Country Club, and Connerly, 36, a Warren native, was executive chef. They had talked about going into business together, but they hadn't necessarily planned on the east side. When the chance came, it fell right.

"The Grosse Pointes are very conservative ... it's a unique town, a club town," Penty says, and he and Connerly are "a couple of club guys."

And while the area "obviously does not have the restaurants that the west side does ... it's a good market and it needs a good restaurant."

Starting with 123

For decades, dining establishments have opened — and closed — at 123 Kercheval Ave., the Hill's

location in a small shopping area that residents call "the hill."

The most recent was Jimmy's, owned by Detroit chef Jimmy Schmidt; it was preceded by his Italian-themed Chianti. Before that was One23, a place with California flair.

"And before that was a litany of restaurants including the Bronze Door, Al Green's — the list goes all the way back to the Punch and Judy Cocktail Lounge after Prohibition," Penty says.

Turnover is the nature of the business. But beyond that, Pointes diners have a reputation for being tight-fisted with their dining dollars. It's not an easy place to please.

Penty admits that 123's track record was sobering, but he and Connerly researched the businesses that had done well there as well as elsewhere on the east side.

"We asked, 'What were the components that made them successful?' Well, it was the on-site individuals that were there, the table-side service, a great steak, a great piece of fish. The basics. We said, 'Look, this is not rocket science — it truly is not rocket science.'"

But it is extremely enjoyable — especially for the customers.

On to the menu

Even before you order, a friendly and professional server delivers one of those bowls of luscious Great Northern bean salad, along with a silver, napkin-lined basket holding a loaf of piping hot, poppyseed-topped bread — the soft, white kind with the yeasty aroma of homemade rolls.

If you feel indulgent, choose an appetizer of Irish Mist smoked salmon to share with the table. The firm slices are succulent and delicate, accompanied by toast points and traditional garnishes of capers, onion and sliced egg. Another starter made for sharing is the baked wheel of French brie, topped with sautéed portabella mushrooms — a great combination of colors and textures. Or try the impressively crabby grilled Jonah crab cakes, made with flavorful herbs and minimal fillers, and a rich Acapulco sauce.

Entrees come with a cup of soup — the cream of tomato is addictive — or a fresh romaine salad with blue cheese, crumbled cauliflower, bacon and sliced Roma tomatoes. Connerly's white French vinaigrette dressing is outstanding — and no, he won't share the recipe.

With a choice of at least 14 seafood entrees daily, fish lovers face hard decisions.

There's a grilled center-cut fillet of Block Island swordfish, finished with chèvre butter — a flavorful treatment of this white, meaty fish — for \$22.95.



A DINER'S GUIDE

**What to wear:** Anything from khakis and sweaters to jackets and ties.

**What to eat:** It's hard to miss. Swordfish, Dover sole and the Hill of Perch are great seafood choices; from the meat side of the menu, try the rib chop, the filet or the New York strip. For casual fare, you can't beat the burgers or pizzas.

**What you'll pay:** Most entrees are \$14-\$27, including soup or salad, starch and vegetable. Sandwiches under \$10; burgers with fries, \$5.95. Mostly American wine list, about 50 choices, \$25-\$200. Major credit cards accepted.

**Where to park:** Meters on Kercheval Avenue or an attended public lot in back.

**Things to know:** Reservations are almost a must on weekends. Smoking in bar only. Wheelchair accessible. Vegetarian options.

**Hours:** Lunch, 11 a.m.-3 p.m. weekdays. Dinner, 5-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 5-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Cocktail lounge open from 11 a.m. until late evening.

And there's delicate Dover sole meuniere — lightly floured and sautéed — for \$26.95, a very good price for this prized European flatfish. A fillet of Lake Superior whitefish, sautéed with a crust of shredded potatoes and served with herb remoulade, is \$16.95.

Best of all may be the plate of pure pleasure called the Hill of Perch — a 5-inch-tall layered tower of fluffy whipped potatoes, a crispy potato basket and golden sautéed filets of fresh perch, accented by a superb lemon caper sauce, for \$18.95.

Don't overlook the steaks and chops, especially the deeply delicious, 20-ounce, grilled rib chop for \$25.95. Connerly trims away the outside layer of gristle and fat from a bone-in slice of prime rib and grills the succulent, tender center, still on the bone. Served with his special bourbon butter sauce, it's a showstopper.

Starches are rice pilaf, redskin or whipped potatoes, or Five Onion Potato Flan, a sturdy, 2-inch-thick square of potato-onion casserole. Lightly steamed fresh green beans are often the vegetable du jour.

For dessert, try Connerly's rich Molten Lava Cake with a soft chocolate center, served with peppermint stick ice cream. The chef has shared his easy recipe; it appears on this page. You also can't go wrong with the silky vanilla creme brulee with a caramel topping and a garnish of fresh red raspberries.

A bit more casual

There's one more thing the new owners do to win their audience's loyalty: Even on a jam-packed Saturday night, the menu in this lovely white-tablecloth restaurant still lists hamburgers, sandwiches and pizzas.

The Hill's juicy, 8-ounce ground steak burger, served with a choice of seven toppings and fries, may be the best \$5.95 meal deal around. And don't miss the blue-cheese pizza with bacon and green onion — the menu calls it "a Hill signature pie."

Penty and Connerly say they have to offer such casual fare to succeed in their neighborhood, and if they dislike doing so, they don't acknowledge it. "From oysters to high chairs, we do it all," Penty says good-naturedly.

The main complaint he hears lately is that it's hard to get a table, even in the bar.

Pointes residents aren't used to making reservations, but they're learning: About half the tables during the week and 95 percent on weekends are taken by guests with reservations.

"People love to know they can come in and have a table waiting," he says.

Penty and Connerly's formula may not be rocket science, but it has clearly launched a winner.

Contact SYLVIA RECTOR at 313-222-6006 and rector@freepress.com.

SYLVIA RECTOR

EATING WELL

The lesson of the Hill: Diners first



SOME RESTAURANTS are designed to capitalize on the latest food trends — bowls of noodles or Latin American cuisine or organically grown vegetables.

Some try to win our favor by entertaining us with animated rain forest animals, pop music memorabilia or tables placed among kiddie rides.

Others try to succeed by being expensive, exclusive and cutting-edge.

All of them have their place. The restaurant industry is highly competitive. People's tastes are fickle; sometimes it seems they change their minds as easily as they change their socks. So it's no wonder that getting attention in the restaurant business often depends on having the wildest concept, the most exotic food or the most prestigious interior designer.

The Hill Seafood & Chop House has none of those.

It was opened in the staid and stable Grosse Pointes by a couple of guys who had grown up on the east side and made names for themselves in private clubs on the west side.

Their theory was simple: Their best chance of success was to create a place that would come as close as possible to being what their local customers wanted in a restaurant.

Written down in black and white, that sounds about as exciting as watching soup simmer. But when you're the customer, and the restaurant delivers on its promise — great food and service, a lovely setting, a warm and comfortable atmosphere — you love and will remember the great sense of pleasure that comes from dining there.

Doing the basics right and putting customers first is really an old-fashioned idea — one that deserves a revival.

The little things

Don't think I'd be happy if every restaurant were a clone of the Hill, with seafood and steaks, sage-green walls and white tablecloths.

But I — and you — would be delighted if more restaurants really stopped to think, like Hill owners David Penty and Michael Connerly did, about what would make their customers feel at home.

It doesn't have to be expensive artwork or a high-end menu that creates a lasting, favorable impression. The smallest things can make a huge difference in how customers feel about a restaurant.

When I arrive, I want a prompt, friendly greeting from someone who is clearly awake and happy to be at their post. I'm the mother of a teenager; I don't need looks of utter boredom.

When I'm seated, I want to sit in a nice place — not the most prestigious table in the restaurant, but not the worst either. I don't want to be stuck under the coatrack by the emergency exit next to the bathrooms when the dining room is half-empty.

When I ask my waiter whether the soup is spicy or the sauce is smoky, I like hearing that he has tasted it. He's my most direct link to the kitchen and I want him to be well-informed. Besides, it shows that management respects and values his role.

I want to see someone in charge walking around the room, making sure the food is good and that I have everything I need. It means someone cares about whether I'm having a nice meal — which goes a long way if a problem does crop up.

A happy ending

And I don't like surprises when the bill arrives.

A restaurant that cares about my satisfaction won't make a big deal out of a minor substitution; I should be able to switch the house mashed potatoes with the house rice pilaf. If I ask for something that will require an extra charge, I want to be informed. And I get really testy when the check comes and I've been charged for soft-drink refills if the menu never said so.

I suspect your own list of pet peeves and priorities would be different. But I feel sure we would agree on this: What we want is a place that makes us feel welcomed, where we feel special and comfortable at the same time — a place that feels like home, only better.

That's what Penty and Connerly had in mind for their customers at the Hill.

Penty calls it "the basics" and says it's "not rocket science."

I call it a great idea for everyone who loves restaurants.

Contact SYLVIA RECTOR at 313-222-6006 and rector@freepress.com.



MOLTEN LAVA CAKE

Butter and sugar for ramekins  
 1/2 pound bittersweet chocolate, finely chopped  
 1/2 pound unsalted butter  
 6 whole eggs  
 1 1/2 cups sugar  
 1/2 cup flour

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Butter the bottom and sides of 15 4-ounce ramekins and sprinkle with sugar, tapping them to remove excess sugar. Set aside.

In the top of a double boiler or heavy bowl set over (but not touching) simmering water, melt the chocolate and butter. Whisk until thoroughly melted and combined.

Meanwhile, in a large bowl whisk together the eggs, sugar and flour until just blended. Gradually whisk the chocolate mixture into the egg

mixture until combined.

Evenly divide the mixture between the prepared ramekins, using about 1/2 cup for each ramekin. Place the ramekins on a baking sheet and bake for 10-12 minutes or until the tops are firm and beginning to crack and the edges are set. Remove from oven and serve immediately with your favorite ice cream.

Makes 15 cakes.

**Cook's note:** The exterior of these should be cake-like while the center should remain soft and nutty.

From executive chef Michael Connerly of the Hill Seafood & Chop House, Grosse Pointe Farms.

Tested by Susan Selinsky for the Free Press Test Kitchen  
 213 calories (55% from fat), 12 grams fat (21 gram sat. fat), 20 grams carbohydrates, 4 grams protein, 25 mg sodium, 144 mg cholesterol, 14 mg calcium, 1 gram fiber

LAST BUT NOT LEAST

Executive chef Michael

Connerly's version of

Molten Lava Cake is

served with peppermint

stick ice cream.