



UNCATEGORIZED

# If the Walls Could Talk

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## New owners give fresh start to Chadds Ford Tavern, a gathering spot with a rich and colorful past

What do George Thorogood, the Underground Railroad, a British call box, and Andrew Wyeth have in common? They all figure into the rich history of a 211-year-old tavern that new owners Kevin Bradley and Mike Rocco have poured heart and soul into in an effort to return it to its former glory as a low-key, high quality spot for musicians and artists, singles and families, foodies and lovers of fine wine.

Chadds Ford Tavern re-opened Sept. 24 to a warm welcome by locals, who had been anticipating the Tavern's return for almost two years and now stack the bar three-deep on Saturday nights. In its heyday—the 1970s—the Tavern was home to a colorful cast of bankers and bikers, artists who birthed the Brandywine School of Art, Civil Rights activists, and Viet Nam vets fresh off tours of duty, with a healthy smattering of famous performers. So says Tom Drane, a beloved local who turned the Tavern keys over to Bradley and Rocco after more than four decades of ownership.

To hear Drane tell it, becoming the spot to be just kind of happened.

When he bought the Tavern in 1967, the Chester, Pa., native was a 25-year-old newlywed. His siblings helped him scrape together \$35,000 for the property, and he manned the establishment every day, morning and night, single-handed. In lieu of hiring staff, his wife would cook a pot of meatballs at home to sell at the Tavern.



Bradley's credentials include the Philadelphia Restaurant School, the renowned Suzanna Foo's, and years as a sommelier.

By the 1960s, the Chadds Ford area was already "chateau country," thanks to several factors, including the growth of the local milling industry, which spurred economic development the early 1800s, according to the Chester County Historical Society. Then, in 1859, a railroad spur was laid through Chadds Ford to support local industry, and it also improved access to the countryside for affluent city dwellers, who began building summer homes in the area. In 1898, Howard Pyle opened a summer art school where the Brandywine School of Art tradition was born.

The school attracted students from across the country, including N.C. Wyeth, from Massachusetts, who came to study and never left.



In contrast, the Tavern's immediate surroundings were decidedly modest —an African American community that had sprung up out of an Underground Railroad stop. The Tavern itself was a rough-and-tumble "juke joint" speakeasy whose clientele was its "Little Africa" neighbors.

Hence the Tavern was situated at a cultural crossroads that mirrored the nation's Civil Rights Movement. And here the coming together of disparate worlds happened organically, with one of the Tavern regulars, Willard Snowden – a onetime sailor and drifter, according to Drane. Snowden was an African American who modeled for Andrew Wyeth. N. C.'s son, Andrew was a cornerstone of the Brandywine School of Art who often developed close friendships with the subjects of his paintings.

"Andy used to drop off Willard with \$20, and he'd hang out at the Tavern. The next thing you know, artists started dropping in," Drane recalls. Wyeth and his son, Jamie, were regulars, as were "Abraham Lincoln artist" Rea Redifer, Frolic Weymouth, and others. The place had an egalitarian vibe: no matter who was on the next barstool, you were just guys having a drink, Drane says. By the early 1970s, there was enough cash to hire kitchen help. Live music a few nights a week soon followed. George Thorogood was a regular in the rotation back then. An early Thorogood album jacket includes a gritty image of liquor bottles from the Tavern bar, according to Bradley "The Voice" Hendrix, who in 1979, at the age of 17, manned the Tavern's turntables. He recently returned to DJ Tuesday nights.

Sometime later, Drane bought a British-style call box (reminiscent of the Dr. Who Tardis), and placed it by the road, hoping to attract visitors. With increasing regularity, the invitation was answered by performers like comedian Rodney Dangerfield, actor Robert Goulet, the Hooters' Eric Bazilian and Rob Hyman, country singer Lee Greenwood, and southern rocker Marshall Tucker.

"Local lore has it that Mick Jagger stopped in when he played the Spectrum," Hendrix says. "I personally saw Huey Lewis come in for the roast beef when he was touring with his first big hit, 'Do You Believe in Love.'"

Drane modestly attributes the tavern's popularity as a hangout for out of town musicians to location and timing, as much as anything. There were several entertainment venues nearby, like Longwood Gardens, the Valley Forge Music Fair (closed in 1996), and The Brandywine Club, (closed in the 1980s) that featured major performers. Many would stop in for a bite, because 40 years ago, he says, the corridor between Rt. 202 and Kennett Square was nothing but corn fields.

Mostly, the stars came to relax, not perform. But occasionally, pop-up entertainment happened, especially when The Brandywiners performed at Longwood, Hendrix says. The troupe, peppered with Broadway and off-Broadway actors, would take over the back room and spontaneously break into songs from the night's show.

Pro sports figures hung out, too. Members of the Broad Street Bullies were regulars in the mid-'70s, when the Flyers took home the Stanley Cup back-to-back: guys like Bernie Parent, Rick MacLeish and Bill Barber. Dick Vermeil, the former Eagles coach, was and is a regular, as were two of his linebackers—Wilmington native Kevin Reilly and Frank LeMaster.

The heyday had passed by 2009, and the property went into decline. Drane had leased it out to someone who turned it into a neglected diner, and a string of bad reviews led to its closing long before the three-year lease was up.

But the great vibe is back, says the front-of-the-house-partner Bradley, whose credentials include Philadelphia Restaurant School, the renowned Suzanna Foo's, and years as a sommelier that took him behind the scenes at scores of top establishments.

Today, the Tavern is once again host to an eclectic clientele who are comfortable with each other. The guy on the adjacent bar stool who starts up a conversation might be a local songwriter or a multi-millionaire who runs a large corporation. The man in the corner booth might be Bam Margera of Jackass fame (he recently stopped in for a burger). The gathering around the outsized wooden table might be a grandma's birthday party, or a contingent of the du Pont family.

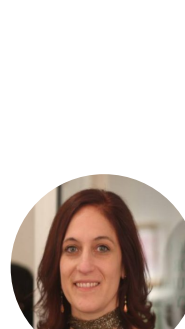
The space is casually appointed with copper ceilings and bar countertop, stained glass accents, and Early American hunt style furniture. There aren't a lot of pictures from the former heyday— it was never the kind of place that welcomed celebrity snapshots. There are, however fine paintings and lithographs on the walls—most from artists who have frequented the establishment.

The ambiance didn't happen by accident, says quiet-but-not-silent-partner Rocco, a restaurant veteran who opened Rocco's in Wilmington and Mike and Nick's Italian Sports Bar in Hockessin. Bradley had a clear vision, intending to create something special, Rocco says, and the pair made it happen with a lot of attention and elbow grease. For instance, Rocco built a rustic wood partition between the bar and dining room, and Bradley built some of the tavern chairs.

Drane, happy to see the tavern in good hands, still comes in to help regularly—repairing a piece of equipment, offering advice, chatting with guests—whatever it takes to foster the special atmosphere associated with the tavern for decades.

Chadds Ford Tavern, 1400 Baltimore Pike, Chadds Ford, Pa., is open 11 a.m. – 2 a.m. daily. Come for the wine list. Bring an appetite: Guests can get an appetizer or house salad for about \$4. Veal Champignon topped with jumbo lump crabmeat and Madeira cream sauce is under \$25. Then settle in for the music (DJ tunes Tuesdays; live music Wednesday through Saturdays).

### Andréa Miller



Andréa Miller writes about arts, entertainment and social issues. She got her start as a reporter, photographer and editor at the Community News group. An award-winning writer, Andréa was honored by Delaware Today in 2010 as a Top Woman in Business for launching Laugh! Magazine. When she's not promoting or enjoying local music, art, drama, food and craft beer, Andréa supports a greener community as the communications coordinator at the Delaware Center for Horticulture. Andréa studied Fine Arts at Carnegie Mellon University and holds a B.S. in psychology from Bryn Mawr College.

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