

## Steak 38 restaurant returns to Rt. 38 in Cherry Hill

Written by

**FRAN LO BIONDO**  
For the Courier-Post

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Vegan, shmeegan.

You can eat plants until your skin turns green, but for some, a nice sirloin steak is the best shortcut to heaven.

Generations have chosen Steak 38 as their classic family restaurant. Without apology, they like their meat red, their seafood raw, their Grey Goose martinis served icy from the piano-shaped bar and a dessert of Bananas Foster flambéed at tableside. Like to smoke? The owners still keep a selection of cigars, although now you have to step outside to light up.

This classic steakhouse reopened in January at the Hillside Inn on Route 38 in Cherry Hill, two years after closing due to the poor economy.

Owners Joe DiAmore of Merchantville and Benji Blumberg remember when all of the fine dining establishments offered such amenities. Their fathers worked at the Latin Casino in Cherry Hill where big stars such as Frank Sinatra and Louis Prima appeared.

Their own friendship goes back to the 1960s when they waited tables at Chubby's steakhouse in North Collingswood. Blumberg went on to open the original Barnacle Ben's Seafood restaurant in 1978 and last year, after 30 years, he sold the Mount Laurel eatery and retired. He was already bored with retirement when his old friend called him about re-opening the steakhouse.

DiAmore, of Merchantville, owned Steak 38 Cafe & Raw Bar in Brigantine, with seating for 500. After nine years, that restaurant tanked, he says, when the state banned smoking in all restaurants and bars -- except the casinos.

"I think it's a disgrace," said a soft-spoken DiAmore. "I pay my own taxes. The government shouldn't tell me to ban smoking in my private establishment. Why should anyone who wants to smoke come here, while they can go to a casino restaurant and enjoy a smoke? It was terribly unfair."

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Brigantine's loss is Cherry Hill's gain, says Helen Foster of Bellmawr.

"Excellent, excellent, excellent," Foster said of her dinner. "I'm going to get that bread pudding for dessert."

Foster, who raised eight children, was dining out with her cousin, Colette Formanek of Haddonfield, mother of nine. Their daughters, Kathi Foster and Barbara Formanek, shared the evening.

"We used to eat here for special family dinners," said Colette, relaxing with a Manhattan before ordering. "I love the prime rib here. We're all very happy they re-opened this place."

"Couples come in weekdays for happy hour -- half-price off on drinks and food on the menu," said DiAmore. "It's a good deal."

"This place is a hidden gem," said Carol Walvoord of Cherry Hill sharing a plate of raw clams at the bar with her husband, Tom.

"They're excellent," said Tom, indicating the clams. "We've had the oysters, pork sliders, the calamari's great; we've had Gorgonzola-crusting steak on toasted bruschetta. Mussels, clams. Sesame crusted tuna -- everything's great. We brought a guest here who has traveled the whole world. He said he'd never had a better steak."

"We have 60-plus years in the restaurant business between the two of us," Blumberg

said. "Joe takes care of the meat end; I take care of the seafood, fresh from the market, prepared daily. Our clientele seems to like this style of dining."

"You take time to enjoy. Have a cocktail, eat, have coffee and dessert and go home -- or stay if you want."

DiAmore estimates the average turnover for a table is two hours, not counting having a drink at the bar before dinner. "We're not rushing anyone out the door."

"It's more fun now," Blumberg says. "We're not young anymore, but we have a young staff. We cover for each other if needed, but most nights, we're both here to greet our customers."

"I think we're unique in what we serve and how we serve it. We are very proud of our steaks, all certified Angus beef. Sirloin, filet mignon, rib-eye," DiAmore says. "I cut my own steaks, and I have a certain way of aging them. I carve some of the entrees at tableside."

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"My specialties are Maryland crab cakes, jumbo lump crab held together with imperial sauce, broiled. And the Mediterranean salad: tossed greens plus lump crab, large shrimp served with our special house dressing."

Joe and Celeste Hastings of Haddonfield make Steak 38 their home twice a week.

Joe's favorites are the snapper soup -- he's a connoisseur, he says -- Steak Diane, and prime rib. For Celeste, the crab balls, the lobster tail and the prime rib hit the spot.

"This place has good food, a very welcoming staff, and it has a nice ambiance," said Celeste. "And Bananas Foster -- we always have to have that," said Celeste.

See Page 2 for recipes from the Steak 38 menu you can try at home. Pour yourself a cocktail, put Sinatra on the stereo, and relax.

Heaven can wait.



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Chef and co-owner Benji Blumberg takes a seat at Steak 38 with some of the restaurant's most popular seafood dishes. Blumberg handles the seafood, while chef and co-owner Joe DiAmore handles the steak. Below, DiAmore shows off some of his specialty steaks at Steak 38 restaurant at the Hillside Inn in Cherry Hill. / JOSE F. MORENO/Courier-Post

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Filet mignon tempts meat lovers at Steak 38, 515 Route 38, in Cherry Hill. / JOSE F. MORENO/Courier-Post

## IF YOU GO

Steak 38, 515 Route 38, Cherry Hill. Open six days a week from 4-11 p.m., closed Mondays. Happy hour: 4-6:30 p.m. weekdays. Call (856) 665-4090.

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