

Siren calls us to Sandy Chanty



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Growing up in Erie imbued me with a fascination for all things nautical. Weekend

walleye excursions on my brother's boat led to repeated readings of "Moby Dick" and "The Old Man and the Sea," which in turn inspired trips to watery places the world over.

I've fished the Caribbean, cruised the Mediterranean, crossed the Atlantic, rounded Cape Horn, sailed the Nile, snorkeled the Red Sea and followed the Huangpu to the Yangtze. My maritime obsession runs so deep I've even been known to use the term "poop deck" in polite company.

So, a few years ago, when I happened upon a little alehouse called the Sandy Chanty in one of my favorite waterside haunts -- Geneva-on-the-Lake, Ohio -- I couldn't resist stopping for a spot of grog.

The old galleon painted on its facade, coupled with the jaunty hornpipe emanating from within, lured me like a siren's call.

Inside, I found everything my salty heart desired: fish nets bursting with creatures of the deep, a well-endowed mermaid figurehead, lyric sheets to naughty sea chanties like "The Female Cabin Boy," and of course, shells, ships, starfish and sand. Lots of sand. The Plexiglass-fronted bar is filled with more than 300 pounds of the stuff.

The Sandbar is unique, but what really caught my eye was the huge, metal shooting gallery looming behind it. Sandy Chanty owner Patt Bowen discovered the gallery when she removed a wall during renovations, revealing a long-forgotten antechamber.

The shooting gallery dates to 1928, and still functions. Rows of ducks waddle, and planes and parachutes twirl as it clanks along. One of the original guns used to shoot down the targets -- a .22 short -- is also on display.

"They used real guns back then," said Bowen. "The funny part is there used to be a bank next door. Apparently, nobody saw a problem with that."

When I returned to the Sandy Chanty this summer, I found Bowen breathing new life into yet another arcade classic -- the claw machine. Bowen's version offers an alternative to the usual kiddie prizes -- you drop the claw into a tank of live lobsters. The evasive crustaceans make tricky targets, but are well worth a \$2 gamble.

"If you grab one, I'll cook it up with a side," Bowen said.

Even if you don't win a lobster, be sure to sample Bowen's cuisine.

"All of my seafood is flown in fresh," she said. "I never know what I'll get -- I just call up Honolulu and see what they have."

Bowen's latest creation is a steak-thick slab of portobello mushroom topped with red peppers,

cheese and smoked seafood sausage. It was so good I thought I'd died and gone to Davy Jones' locker. Other specialties include lobster lasagna, conch fritters and deep-fried alligator -- aka "Hook's Revenge."

The Sandy Chanty doesn't serve hard alcohol, but there's plenty of wine and beer to choose from. They also make a tasty Catawba Jell-O shot.

This weekend is Bowen's annual Chanty Festival -- a celebration of waters fresh and briny. Music, good ale and high-seas shenanigans will abound, so put on your best eye-patch and cast off for the Sandy Chanty.