

Walt's Wharf

By Ava Garderet

An interview with General Manager Christopher Fowler reveals the history of an iconic favorite on Main Street

If you hang your hat anywhere in the Orange County area there is no doubt that you have heard of, if not dined at, Walt's Wharf. The iconic seafood restaurant on Main Street in Seal Beach offers an intimate setting with a rustic, casual atmosphere, as well as a fascinating history that deserves a closer look.

The original building was completed in the 20s, and while some of it was used for apartments, the majority of it was a "building of ill repute" – a brothel that was popular with the many sailors who came into Seal Beach. Rumor also has it that at that time the docks were used to bootleg the liquor that was featured in those activities.

Walt's Wharf officially opened in 1970; we just celebrated its 50th anniversary last year, a celebration that unfortunately occurred during the pandemic. Back in the day, the founder, Walter Babcock, was a dentist and a seafood fan who was frustrated because he saw all of the fishermen docking with fresh catches, and yet the nearest place to buy fresh fish was all the way in Newport. He promptly decided that he would create a fish market himself, the original location of which was located where the bar area is now. As the only one offering fresh fish in the area, demand was high, and he soon decided to put in burners and fryers, adding the option for customers to choose to buy prepared fish in addition to taking the fresh products to go. He continued to expand, turning the apartments upstairs into the dining room.

Current general manager Christopher Fowler recounts that, ever since Walter opened the restaurant, there have been only two major changes of ownership – neither of which were particularly successful or lasted long. Rumor has it that in the 70s someone tried to transform the upstairs area into a disco. However, the better known change was in the 80, when Walter was temporarily unsure about staying in the restaurant industry so he sold it to a new owner who made it into a spaghetti restaurant. It only lasted for about a year before it was turned back over to Babcock ownership, but Fowler tells us to look out for one of the walls in Walt's Wharf, which is still painted red as a tribute. Since that transition in the 80s, hardly any of the restaurant's decor has changed at all.

In addition to the restaurant, the Babcock family is known for Babcock Winery, located in Santa Barbara County. Fowler commented, chuckling, that "Walter was a smart businessman, always trying to minimize the number of middlemen involved. In the starting days of Walt's Wharf, he quickly realized that rather than buying from the fishermen he could purchase a boat of his own and do the fishing himself." Similarly, the original purpose of the vineyard was to grow and sell fresh produce for the restaurant. It turned out to be extremely profitable wine country land and the rest is history – just have a glass at Walt's Wharf and see for yourself how good it is!

Though the restaurant attracts tourists on holiday weekends, its customer base is primarily regulars. The nice thing about Walt's is that it has been around so long that it is absolutely iconic in Seal Beach, and attracts people from all over Orange County. "Customers in their 90s who have come here for every birthday for decades will also bring their grandchildren, who then come to eat as adults with great memories of the place," Fowler remarked fondly.

The restaurant's most popular dish is the caramelized salmon, which has been offered since the early 90s and, according to Fowler, "will never leave the menu." It is sauteed with ingredients like ginger, soy, balsamic reduction, lemongrass, and beurre blanc – an all time favorite.

The new bar manager, none other than Fowler himself, ran restaurants in New York for about 15 years and during that time found himself immersed in the realm of cocktails. "When I became manager here," he said, "I saw the potential for improvement in our slightly outdated cocktail program, mostly by upgrading the quality of our spirits and emphasizing fresh products, as well as skewing the style of cocktails in a more refined direction, rather than primarily serving super sweet drinks." He went on to describe two of the restaurant's newest cocktails. The first is the Hibiscus Sour, which is a classic egg white sour with lemon hibiscus liqueur and a touch of ginger; a crisp cocktail that simultaneously has a rounder taste. "The second is one of my own creations," Fowler reported proudly, "the Oak-Smoked Manhattan. Our oak grill is an iconic part of the restaurant – there is always the smoky scent lingering in the air – and I wanted to harken back to that in this drink. What I did was take Luxardo cherries and smoked them in the smoker, collecting the syrup that is full of that smoky essence as well. The cocktail consists of amaro liqueur with Chinese rhubarb supplemented with rye, and the finishing touch is the garnish of cherries and a drizzle of that cherry syrup, all coming together to make the drink a smoky yet smooth experience."

The new chef, John Schoeberl ("Johnny") impresses us all with his weekend specials, but most of all, he seems to really understand the essence and character of Walt's Wharf. Fowler said that in his experience, most chefs come in trying to show off their ideas, but since day one Johnny had none of that ego. He recognized that the job was not about promoting his own name but preserving that of the restaurant, and while he has been encouraged to incorporate some of his own creations, he was ready and willing to learn all of the original favorite recipes and old favorites.

Fowler reported that, like other restaurants in the area, Walt's was first forced to shut down in March of 2020, and the Babcocks were not sure if they would be able to reopen. "At that time," Fowler said, "Walt had already passed (he left us about six years ago), so his daughter Brenda and her husband took the restaurant under their wing, now their baby to nurture, but they lacked restaurant experience and for a little while they seriously considered selling it." That's when there was a huge surge in community outreach that changed everything. There are just not a lot of places like Walt's Wharf in Southern California – single family owned and operated for so many years – and customers were devastated by the thought of it closing permanently. That November the restaurant was able to open for a short three days before

restrictions were enforced again and it was shut down. Next they revamped to set up a tent outside, which this time lasted eight days before being shut down again. Finally, in April of 2021, indoor and outdoor seating became available, although with a limited menu and hours because of staffing shortages. “As of today,” Fowler said, “while we still aren’t operating under full speed quite yet, we are doing much better than we have since the start of the pandemic, and it has been extremely humbling to see the consistent, daily outpour of support and gratitude from all of our regulars.”