

A DIAMOND ANNIVERSARY



PHOTOS BY TYLER BARRICK/FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Harold Imperatore, proprietor of the Bernards Inn, in the dining room known as the Silver Vault, which once housed a four-lane bowling alley.

Memories are perfect gift for inn

BY JOHN HOLL
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Over the last century the Bernards Inn has been many things. In addition to restaurant and hotel, it has housed an art shop and a bowling alley.

It's had fine dining upstairs and a beer and shot joint in the basement. Couples have met there, and many have married and celebrated anniversaries within its walls.

And now, as it turns 100 years old, the Bernards Inn — an anchor in downtown Bernardsville — is undergoing a rebirth.

The real estate company Hampshire Destination Properties bought the building last year and already has invested about \$1.5 million of a planned \$2 million renovation into the building. All of the 20 guest rooms have been redone as well as most of the dining rooms.

For example, the lower level,



The bar is newly renovated as part of the 100th anniversary celebration.

which once featured the four-lane bowling alley, is now known as the Silver Vault, where soft lighting, exposed brick and china cabinets filled with numerous silver settings

create an intimate tone.

Upstairs in the kitchen, the inn hired Corey W. Heyer as executive chef to create a new, modern menu that changes with the sea-

sons but still gives a nod to the past.

Deborah Dowdell, president of the New Jersey Restaurant Association, said it is important to note not just the historical significance of the inn, but also its longevity.

"This is a very high-risk industry," she said. "More restaurants close than remain open."

Dowdell said the inn has the benefit of having owners that have continually tried to maintain the restaurant as a high-end operation, seeking out top chefs and staff. It is unclear how many other restaurants in the state have been open for 100 years or longer.

As part of the centennial anniversary, the owners are looking for stories from people who remember the inn as it was or who have special memories rooted at the restaurant.

Harold Imperatore, the proprietor of the restaurant, said he has overheard stories from older [See ANNIVERSARY, Page 32]



TYLER BARRICK/FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

The Bernards Inn is undergoing a \$2 million renovation and has a modern new seasonal menu that still gives a nod to the past.

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Rebirth at the inn

couples who remember meeting in the restaurant, or once working as servers. Many residents remember when the inn housed the town post office and municipal offices.

But, Imperatore said, so far

there have been "no good ghost stories."

There are some historical photographs. One is a shot of the entrance to the old downstairs bar, the Rathskeller, a place some remember as more of a dive than restaurant. That area is now a wine cellar with dark wood tables covered in fine linen. It is regularly used by corporate clients who make good use of the 60-inch plasma screen television discretely hidden behind thick wooden doors.

Jean Hill, a lifelong Bernardsville resident and member of the town historical society, said the inn represents the way things used to be. In a telephone interview, she recalled having regular Sunday dinners at the restaurants during her childhood in the 1930s.

The town has gone through changes and median household incomes have climbed, but the inn has remained, residents said.

Hill said it is good the inn has remained open, keeping some

charm in the area and "has not become a chain restaurant, like they have everywhere else."

For Imperatore, whose family owns several prominent businesses in the state, including the NY Waterway ferry service, running the Bernards Inn has been a great experience.

"There is history here, great history," he said. "It's nice to be able to continue a long-standing tradition."

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