



Local restaurants *and their fans*

Andy Fitzpatrick
The Enquirer

The eaters of the area have spoken and they continue to speak as they frequent their favorite restaurants.

The winners of the Enquirer's 2011 Best of the Southwest competition are led by *Clara's on the River*, which has won **Best Overall** this year. Readers could vote online or send in ballots naming their favorite restaurants in a number of categories.

Clara's also took **Best Ambiance**, **Best Hospitality** and **Best Cocktails**. Owner Ross Simpson is happy about the wins, but none of this is a surprise to the people who matter most in the competition: Clara's customers.

A group of employees from Battle Creek's Summit Pointe sat in a booth at Clara's Friday enjoying their pre-salad soups. One of them, Bob Lambert of Paw Paw, said the restaurant winning in multiple categories made sense to him, especially in the hospitality department. "They know your likes and dislikes," he said.

"They know your wants and desires. Really, they do everything they can to try to make your dining experience pleasant."

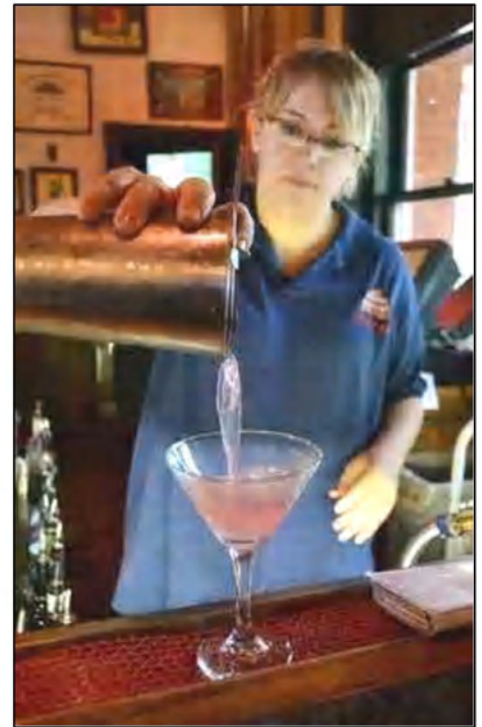
Another member of the Summit Pointe lunch group, Jeannie Goodrich of Union City, said staff will often check up on them to make sure they're having a good time.



The exterior of Clara's on the River.



Sit and enjoy a few cocktails at Clara's.



"Ross still comes up and bothers me every time I'm eating," she joked. "It makes you feel very welcome."

One of the people responsible for that hospitality is Clara's hostess Hannah Stout of Battle Creek. The 20 year-old has been working at the riverside restaurant for about two years and initially thought it would be an interesting place to work. She said the key to being a good hostess is remembering what people like when they walk in, such as where they like to sit and what they like to drink.

"I feel pretty good about that," she said of Enquirer readers voting for Clara's. "It makes me feel good as a person to know that we have that and I help out with that."

According to Simpson, the hospitality continues past the hostess station at the front door and to the bar where he described bartenders as performers on a stage responding to the customers' need to talk to someone after a long day. They need to be clever as well, he said, which can lead to clever drink recipes.

One of them is Clara's own take on the Long Island iced tea, the Boston Tea Party. "It's our Long Island iced tea, then you add gin and Grand Marnier," he said. "We start watching you after one of those."