

THE MOST EXPENSIVE RESTAURANT IN THE WORLD

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By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Most expensive in the world? For me this is true, because we owned it and my family and I ran it, or tried to. It seemed like a wonderful idea at the time.

We had this large building that had been built as a parsonage in the early 1900s. It had been a part of a business complex for a company I founded (AMG – All-Music Guide, All-Movie Guide, etc.), but I had moved that whole business to Ann Arbor and sold it. So there the building sat. I tried to rent it but no one seemed interested.

Somewhere along about 2003 I had the harebrained idea to turn it into a restaurant. My wife Margaret would want you to know that this was solely my idea. And so it was, but the kids liked the thought and we could not rent the building and.... well, you know how that goes. Pretty soon I had workmen in there tearing it apart and turning it into a restaurant which was a lot more complicated than I would have guessed. As it turned out we pretty much had to do all new wiring, all new plumbing, including mammoth gas pipes and gas service to deal with the large stove and pizza ovens.

That's right, homemade pizza was something we definitely wanted to serve. Where did this crazy idea (as some friends deemed it) come from?

There are different answers to that question. One is that there was no decent place to eat in town, but I know you don't want to believe that was the only reason, although it has merit. Most of all I was appalled at what restaurants had done to food in the ones I knew, like process almost everything. We would not do that.

Having been trained in macrobiotics years before I knew more than a little about whole foods and what is healthy and what is not. But when I really look deep into my soul I feel that somewhere in there I always wanted to have a restaurant AND I saw it as a way to bring the whole family together on a project. What fun and it was!

And I love designing space and creating mandalas – signs of something greater than just my linear life from birth to death. There have to be an oasis or two in every life and the “Two Sisters Café” was going to be one of them. In actuality it was financially a train wreck.

The name of the café came from my brother Daniel, the second in line of five boys, I being the oldest. Since my daughters May and Michael Anne were going to help run it, we ended up calling it the Two Sisters Café and that stuck. It was a great name. Thanks Dan!

Of course I was in full swing and high gear in creating atmosphere for the place. This is my

specialty – actively creating space to live in. There is little I like more, and I was soon head over heels involved in the look and feel of the place. Of course the whole family helped, only it was me that was down there from dawn to dusk so to speak directing the work team. That is my idea of fun.

Then there was the menu. Everyone pitched in on that and the girls (my wife Margaret and my two daughters) knew a lot more than I did about recipes and cooking. We all knew that we wanted to create a menu with no processed food on it, as in “home cooked,” made-on-site, etc. And we did. We made our own salad dressings, peeled all our potatoes, fashioned all our soups from scratch, and on and on. Crazy as I am I insisted on only the finest ingredients, like \$6 a pound (our cost) for the corned beef that we used in sandwiches, real Genoa salami, really fine olives, and so on. You get the idea. It was from the start way over the top.

We did serve meat because not to do so would be instant death in the small conservative town we live in. But even our meat was handled with care. Our homemade meatballs were just incredible and we cooked our Salisbury steak all night in slow cookers. We ordered only the finest Ahi Yellowfin tuna and our salmon was hand-hooked in Canada. I could go on and on. You would like to eat at the Two Sister’s Café I can assure you. Maybe I just did it to make sure that somewhere in the world such a place existed! Even I don’t know for sure.

We had a \$6000 espresso machine and served up all the wonderful drinks you would find in Seattle and San Francisco. We had rare gourmet teas and all kinds of special coffees. And food and drink was not the end of it. We wanted to make the café a community center of sorts, so we had entertainment. I had a special red theater curtain custom-made and a track of theater lights installed with spots out front.

On Friday and Saturday nights we would curtain off one room and have bands, folk acts, magic, and even poetry. I am still a wannabe beatnik at heart, and a coffee-house atmosphere is part of this dream I call life.

We opened our doors in the fall of 2003. Let me start out with the good news, which was that the food was wonderful. It was all home cooked, handmade the old-fashioned way, and delicious. I should know. I put on a lot of weight eating there every night. We pretty much stopped cooking at home. In fact we had a little table just inside the back doorway where the family would sit. I called it the “mafia table” because we were like Tony Soprano eating spaghetti at the back of the restaurant. I loved that and I ate all kinds of things I should not have eaten, and repeatedly.

And a certain group of townspeople saw it for what it was and loved it. The rest (I am sorry to say) could not tell the difference between us and Applebees, incredible as that sounds. And now for the bad news.

We knew nothing about running a restaurant. Nada. And my penchant for serving only the best

was a pipe dream I smoked and it cost us dearly. I am sure we were losing money on all kinds of stuff. And waste! We knew neither how to control waste or portions. From the get-go, it was way over the top.

We managed to limp by for about two and one half years before the economics really sank in. We were not making any money. Worse, we were losing money. And to top it off a general manager that I had hired was ripping us off until we caught on to her. She was not paying the taxes, but pretending to. This cost us a mere \$40,000 when the IRS came calling.

Also, one of the two sisters, my daughter May's music career suddenly began to take off and she was out of there and on the road. This was her chance. This left one sister, Michael Anne, who bravely carried on with help from the rest of us. And so on. Michael Anne is now a gourmet chef who caters to large groups every now and again.

The bottom line was that the place could not keep its doors open and had to close. Perhaps the biggest lesson learned was that just because you make a superior product does not mean people can tell the difference or care. We did not serve alcohol (on principle) and that hurt us big time. Kitchen and serving help turned over like a Ferris wheel and it seems like we were endlessly training new folks. And half the workers were alcoholics or druggies. This is standard in restaurants. We hit a brick wall.

On the entertainment side, we have a mini-theater right in the restaurant, with lights, curtain, and a solid sound system. It was like an old-time hippie coffee house. We had poetry, magic, and lots and lots of music. My daughter May's current husband Seth Bernard courted her from the stage, singing love songs to my daughter. I totally approved. And so it went.

I must say that it was a wild ride and (aside from the cost) a fun ride, although I will never again drive by a restaurant parking lot without counting the cars in it and wincing if there are few to none. I have enormous compassion for anyone gutsy enough to open and run a restaurant. The profit margin is so narrow that you have to be totally dedicated to even survive. And you really need to have a family to make it economical. I had the family, but none of us knew the business.

Still the food was great and good times outnumbered the bad ones. So I can say without blinking that for a couple of years I ate at the most expensive restaurant in the world. I include some photos for your enjoyment!



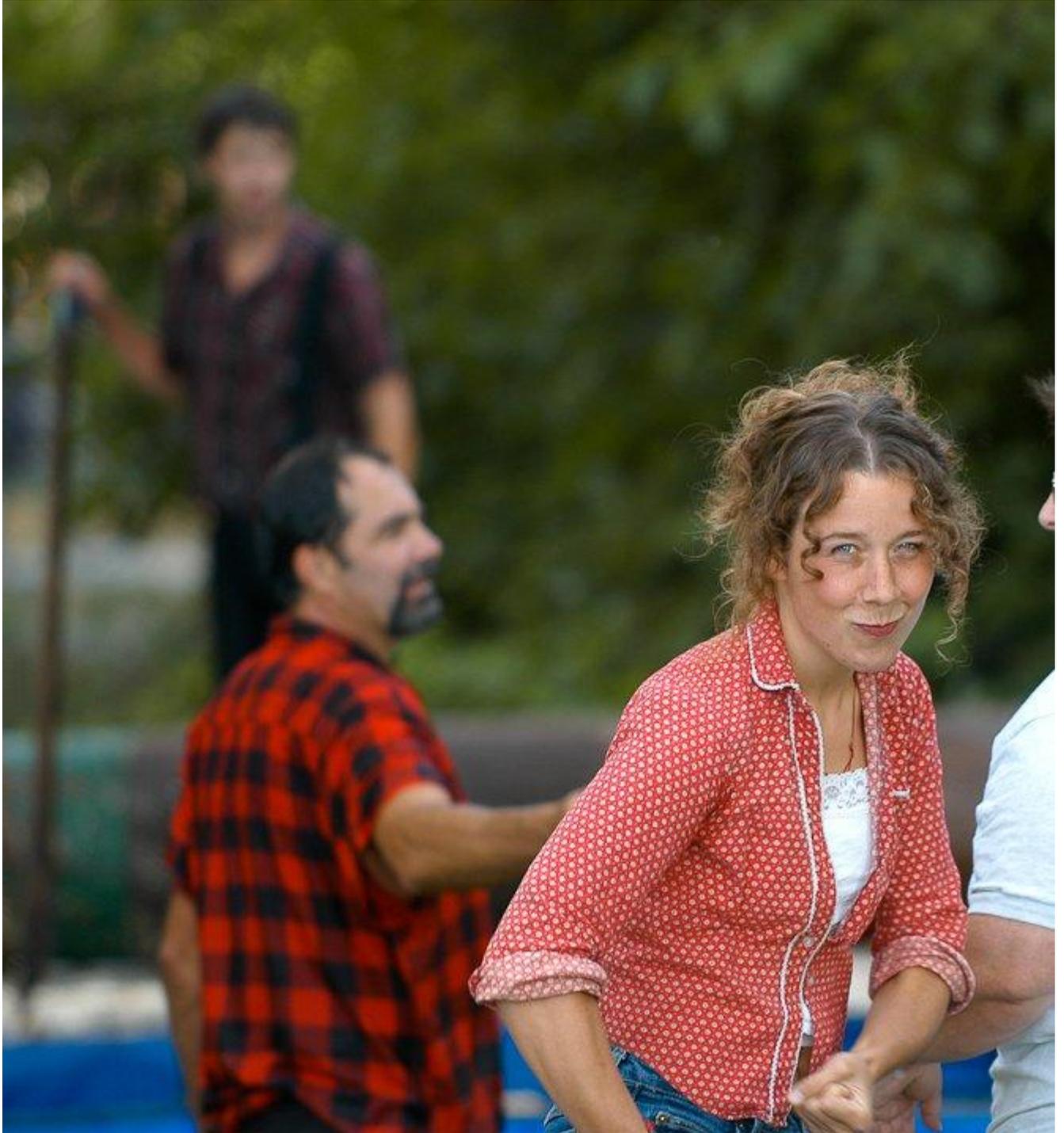
The Two Sisters Café at 407 North State Street in Big Rapids, Michigan.



Here is the Two Sisters in full swing. The walls were all painted in different pastel shades by my artist-daughter Michael Anne.



Margaret, the mother of all cooks, well, at least of the two sisters. — with Margaret Erlewine.



Two Sister Michael Anne Erlewine, photo taken at a lumberjack contest in which she participated. — with Michael Anne Erlewine.



One of the two sisters, May Erlewine, whose career began to take off at this time. Today she is in Ethiopia playing music to help raise funds for building schools there. — with May Erlewine Bernard.



One of the two kitchen areas, this with the espresso machine. You can see our little family table (Mafia Table) in the background. This is where I sat and watched the customers and gained weight.



Here is our little family table (Mafia Table) in the background. This is where I sat and watched the customers and gained weight.



Check out the menus and prices. This was all homemade.



The café at night turned into a little night club, albeit one without alcohol.



Weekend nights had entertainment. Note our lovely red theater curtain.



Here is where our homemade pizza was put together and baked up.



We had a whole second floor where food was prepared, especially baked goods.



Food storage room.



My daughter Michael Anne is an expert baker and would produce incredible muffins and scones.



Hot chocolate with whipped cream, topping, and a chocolate swizzle stick.



Patio where summer lunches and dinners were served.



Homemade meatballs and spaghetti.



Feta cheese and olives.



Homemade lasagna.

Two Sisters Cafe

407 N. State Street in Big Rapids

796-5736

JOHN SINCLAIR & THE BLUES SCHOLARS

John Sinclair

- Poet of Note
- Performer
- Recording Artist
- Journalist
- Award-Winning DJ
- Blues Expert
- Chairman of the White Panther Party
- Marijuana Advocate
- Manager MC5 Band
- Political Prisoner 10-for-2
- Founder of Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival
- Director of the Detroit Jazz Festival
- Record Producer
- Author: Guitar Army
- Counterculture Celebrity

Kick Out The Jams ...



Blues Scholars

Seth Bernard
(guitar)
Michael Erlewine
(harmonica)
Daisy May
(vocals)

Also: Blues Workshop

Saturday Afternoon
1 PM to 3:30 PM \$10

Blues - music, history, and poetry - presented by an expert in a fresh and exciting manner. Includes music PLUS a free surprise video screening.

At: Two Sisters Library
407 N. State Street

TWO BIG NIGHTS KICK OUT THE JAMS

FRIDAY MAY 14

John Sinclair & Blues Scholars: 9:00 PM with Party Afterward

SATURDAY, MAY 15

John Sinclair & Blues Scholars: 9:00 PM with Party Afterward

A Weekend of Blues Entertainment

An example of the entertainment. My friend poet John Sinclair reading poetry to blues. I am playing harmonica behind him with Seth Bernard and May Erlewine. Big fun.