



Southerner's casual, unpretentious décor supports its unique appeal and crafted southern dishes like Nana's fried chicken (below), which is known to sell out.



BY MARLA R. MILLER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB WALCOTT

Southern roots

A metal rooster sign with “Hey there, welcome” written on brown paper invites diners to walk down the hall.

There, the cottage-esque Southerner restaurant opens into a cozy dining room with windows overlooking the Kalamazoo River, antique tables with mismatched chairs, plates and silverware, and blue wide-mouth Ball jars.

Imagine walking into grandma’s house for Sunday dinner, except someone else is doing the cooking so you can sit back, relax and catch up over cocktails with a marina view. The unpretentious ambiance, served up with a plate of finger-lickin’ good fried chicken, welcomes people from all walks of life.

Inspired by chef Matthew Millar’s southeastern Tennessee roots, he wanted to capture the spirit and tradition of southern cooking and the meeting of two cultures through food. The Southerner’s name pays

homage to one of the first passenger trains that linked the south and the north.

Like many Appalachian families, Millar’s family moved north in the 1950s to find work in factories and the automotive industry. Millar, born in Detroit, carries on the home cooking of his mother, Nana and great aunts.

“Food was more than just fuel,” he said. “It could really touch your heart and soul. It was about the spirit of it.”

Millar, an accomplished chef and two-time semifinalist for the regional James Beard award, worked as an executive chef in fine dining and tried owning other restaurants. He finally found his calling with unique Southern-style dishes.

“I had always wanted to do something like this,” he said. “I wanted to do something a little more down to earth, a little more simple and honest.”

Millar and co-owner Katie Fris opened the restaurant four years ago. The two



Chicken, grits and other southern fare make The Southerner a down-home destination.



“The food makes you feel good, the hospitality, the location. It’s grandma’s house.”
— Katie Fris



Whether ordering burgers, barbeque, breakfast or cocktails, Southerner has become a popular stopping place for area visitors and boaters.

worked together at New Holland Brewing Co., and Fris always admired Millar’s standards and cooking.

“He’s a trendsetter in food,” she said.

Located on busy Holland Street leading to Saugatuck, the yellow one-story building has been expanded several times. The original structure housed a net shop that offered fishing net rentals and repairs.

For years, it operated as Elbo Room, a well-known breakfast hot spot named for the

view of the curve in the Kalamazoo River. Breakfast may be tradition, but Nana’s fried chicken is The Southerner’s real bread and butter. In the summer, locals, boaters and tourists buy it by the bucket.

Served hot and juicy and large enough for two, Nana’s half-fried chicken comes in a traditional buttermilk batter or Nashville hot with two sides. Homemade biscuits, braised greens simmered in miso, mashed potatoes and gravy, baked beans, cabbage slaw and grits are among the savory sides.

The Southerner offers a simple but eclectic menu, ranging from fried bologna sandwich to bobwhite quail. Specialties of the house include mac and cheese, shrimp and grits, country fried pork shoulder steak and Michigan whitefish, plus rotating specials.

Some of the recipes come from family. Millar credits the cinnamon roll to his Nana, the bread and butter pickles to his wife’s mom and many of the desserts to his great-grandmother.

Millar seeks out quality and authentic products, buying Benton’s bacon from Tennessee and Anson Mills antebellum grits from South Carolina. He uses locally sourced produce and other seasonal vegetables as much as possible and makes the biscuits,

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THE SOUTHERNER

880 Holland St., Saugatuck
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Hours: 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday and 5-10 p.m. seven days a week; breakfast/lunch served daily 9-3 p.m. and dinner 5-10 p.m. May 27-Oct. 1.

jams, jellies, hot sauce and pickles in-house.

In the summer months, Millar takes the cooking outside, smoking and slow-cooking pulled pork, ribs, smoked sausage, pork chops, turkey, even wild boar. The barbecue fare highlights regional flavors from Memphis, New Orleans and the Carolinas.

"I'm more interested in what came before me and how that translates into the modern table," he said. "Southern cooking is one of the country's only real regional cooking styles. There's a lot of American history woven into southern cooking."

Millar manages the kitchen, while Fris and husband Jonathon run the front of the house, bar and administrative duties. Fris continues to refine the restaurant's liquor selection, offering unique whiskey, scotch, rum, gin and other spirits.

Fris said there are no rules to the cocktails, even creating boozy slushies with gin and mezcal that are popular in the summer months. They both emphasize quality standards and teaching and training of kitchen, wait and bar staff.

The Southerner offers a couple of transient slips for small boats and can seat larger groups, which is why the owners say to count on a wait during the busy summer months. They welcome people in the winter and spring when there is a slower pace, more space and seasonal specials. An added perk: The quaint feel and waterfront view never go out of season.

"The food makes you feel good, the hospitality, the location," Fris said. "It's grandma's house."

Marla R. Miller is an award-winning journalist who lives in Norton Shores.



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