

Rivertown Survivor

At 95 years young, Andrews on the Corner thrives on hospitality and hockey — plus a new influx of RiverWalk traffic

BY MELISSA WALSH // PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSH SCOTT



Andrews on the Corner more than survived the wrecking ball that crashed into Rivertown more than a decade ago — it has thrived. How? A combination of uniquely Detroit hospitality, one of the best perch dinners in the city, and the blessings of the hockey gods.

Andrews on the Corner is part of Detroit's Rivertown area — one of Detroit's oldest neighborhoods whose landscape was dominated by warehouse and industry complexes with river access. During the early 1980s, the area's historic taverns and pubs, several from the Prohibition era, attracted patrons from across the city and suburbs. The area emerged as a hot nightlife destination dubbed as Rivertown.

In April 1998, Detroit City Council approved a \$250 million deal to buy Rivertown real estate on behalf of casino developers, who were poised to purchase the land from the city. The land deal fell through. By the time the casino projects were scratched, Rivertown had been ravaged by demolition crews. Popular establishments were forced out, and most of those outside the

projected casinos' boundaries were unable to sustain business. Lost were Detroit venues of cherished memory, including Soup Kitchen, Woodbridge Tavern, BC's, Rivertown Saloon, and Rhinoceros Club.

"It left me alone and almost destroyed me," says Tom Woolsey, Andrews on the Corner owner and manager. "It really hurt."

Andrews on the Corner became the sole survivor of Rivertown's nightclub scene. "Soul" survivor may be a better description; without the passion of Woolsey, the bar would not likely have survived the wake of the Rivertown disaster, let alone flourish.

Where everyone knows your jersey number

There are two kinds of hockey supporters in Detroit: fair-weather Red Wings fans and members of Detroit's impressive hockey community. While many of the former persuasion secure expensive seats at Joe Louis Arena when the Red Wings are hot, those among the latter group are frequent patrons of Andrews on the Corner before, during, and after Red Wings games. They've endured seasons of struggle in the 1980s through the playoff victories enjoyed over the past 20 seasons.

Woolsey is well connected with the area's current and retired professional hockey players — and host to the truest hockey fans in the region. He's a member of the Michigan Sting 60-and-older elite hockey team. So it is fitting that the venue is the hangout of hockey enthusiasts and Red Wings loyalists, including many NHL and minor-pro alumni.

Located at Joseph Campau Avenue and Atwater Street, the bar is an easy commute from the Joe and the place to meet up with a friend who has an extra ticket to the game, eat a fine perch dinner, have a few pops, and enjoy camaraderie rich in hockey lore and legend. It's where devotees — those who live the hockey life, respect the journey to its elite ranks, honor its code, and find comfort in the solemn belief that the hockey gods are always fair — celebrate the game.

"It's just what you do. It's a part of growing up in Detroit's hockey culture," says Greg Cheesewright, an Ontario native who befriended Woolsey upon moving to the area and entering Detroit's hockey community in 1978.

"First time I went into Andrews on the Corner," says Junior Red Wings alumnus Rich Hutchinson, "I went in there with [Red Wings] Paul Woods, John Barrett, and Reed Larson. I was playing minor league hockey then."

Like many veterans of the sport's elite levels, Hutchinson joined Billy C's Wednesday Night Hockey League after retiring from professional hockey in the 1980s. Billy C is Bill Ciraulo, a Junior Red Wings alumnus. For many years, Ciraulo has served as director of amateur hockey operations for Little Caesars AAA Hockey Club and as head coach of its Midget Major team.

"Anyone who's in the hockey business knows Tom's bar is a friendly place," Ciraulo says.

"It's like a who's who of hockey," Hutchinson adds. "There's always someone there I knew from hockey — whether I had played against them or with them."





Andrews' Team Captain

Like most who have experienced the thrill of lacing 'em up and doing battle on the ice, Woolsey fell in love with hockey at first sight. Following a November freeze in 1954, when he was 9 years old, Woolsey rode his bike down Atwater Street to where Hart Plaza is today. He discovered guys playing hockey on the outdoor rink there. He decided to join them.

"I had never skated before," Woolsey says. "So I rode all the way back and told my grandpa, 'I want to go ice skating. I need some ice skates.'" His grandfather took him to Griswold Sports Shop and bought him his first pair of skates. Woolsey's days as a hockey player began. At age 68, he still plays hockey three days a week.

In 1982, Woolsey became the first to offer shuttle service to and from Red Wings games. From his bar that seats 140, he has taken up to 500 fans to the Joe on a single game night.

"When they won the Cup in 1997," he says, "I was here for 30 hours straight."

Woolsey still hosts players and coaches whom he's befriended over the seasons. "Scotty Bowman and Barry Smith come in here a lot," he says. With the exception of current Wings coach, Mike Babcock, every coach since Nick Polano (1982-85) has stopped in for a visit.

"Coaches seminars, we'd call it," Ciraulo says.

From feeding NHL refs after a game to hosting a private party for a player, Woolsey takes care of hockey guys like an attentive parent.

"I had [superstar Wayne] Gretzky in here for a whole day one time," he says.

"Tom is like the team captain of the hockey community," Hutchinson says.

A 95-year tale

The patronage at Andrews is not just a bar crowd. It's the legacy of a 95-year-old Detroit business.

"This is not just my business; this is my soul," Woolsey says.

"This is my living room. I was raised here."

After immigrating to Detroit from Greece, Woolsey's grandfather, Gus Andreacos, and his brother Andy, who changed their surname to Andrews, bought the building in 1918 from the Bidigare family and called their new business Andrews Restaurant and Confectionery Shop.

"This was before Prohibition," Woolsey says. "They used to require people to serve food to be able to serve liquor. So they would make soup and give it away so that they could sell liquor."

Following Prohibition, the business became Andrews Bar and Restaurant.

Woolsey's grandfather lived upstairs until his death in 1977 at the age of 82. Woolsey's mother and uncle were raised in the rooms above the bar. Woolsey grew up in a house adjacent to the building.

"I played on these streets down here, fished off these docks," he says.

Woolsey grew up working here after school, serving coffee and sandwiches to employees from area businesses, including Parke Davis, located across Joseph Campau.

In 1981, Woolsey took over proprietorship of the bar and renamed it Andrews on the Corner. It wasn't long before Woolsey's hockey buddies made the bar their clubhouse.

Rivertown Reinvented

As the hockey gods continued to smile on Woolsey, the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy planted seeds for new business in the fertile garden of riverfront development known as Detroit's RiverWalk, an initiative launched a decade ago.

Since the 1970s, Detroit planners have spoken in terms of "renaissance." Yet the RiverWalk corridor is more a product of reinvention, promoting what Detroiters adore about their city — her industry, waterway, traditions, and people.

"I think we've hit rock bottom, when you think about how the city was taken over," Woolsey says. The silver lining may be funding acquired to realize plans imagined years ago for reinventing the city.

"It's transcended from the New Center area to Midtown through the Wayne State area to downtown, and now it's spreading this way," Woolsey says. "And we can see the traffic, the people. We can see the attitudes.

"The area has changed its identity because of the RiverWalk," Woolsey adds. "It's now a recreation place. When you're down here on weekends, it's almost like being in a resort area."

Michael Koch, who has worked at Andrews for 30 years, agrees. "Our business is changing," he says. "It used to be a winter, hockey bar. Now summer months are our busiest time."





Hockeytown Hospitality

With the influx of hotels and residential complexes and new or expanding marinas and parks, traffic of all varieties populates the RiverWalk daily. With the changing scenery emerges new patrons.

But Andrews on the Corner still loves its hockey crowd — and regulars testify that what keeps them coming back is the hospitality.

"Tommy's hospitality is above and beyond," Cheesewright says. "For what he does, he's just the best."

"I see a lot of new faces every game," says Laura McGregor, who has tended bar there since 1982. "It used to be that I knew everybody. Now I see a lot of kids of patrons that used to come in before games."

Members of Hockeytown's legendary hockey community will likely continue to make the corner of Atwater and Joseph Campau their game-night gathering place, even after the Red Wings begin competing in the new arena planned for Midtown.

"What makes it the best is Tommy himself," Cheesewright says. "That man makes the tradition. If he were to leave and go someplace else, I'd follow. No matter where he goes or what he does, he would have a throng of people that would follow."

"Tom puts his heart and soul into this place every day. This is his life," McGregor says.

"Like hockey," Woolsey says. "If you don't work hard, you don't get to play."