

Altona owners moved ahead in 2020

By Mark Sherry

Like every food and beverage business in the world, the Altona Supper Club in New Holstein saw a marked decline in business during the worst of the pandemic.

But a combination of hard work, flexibility and foresight by co-owners Dave Braun and Jason Hunsader—along with their loyal employee team and a supportive customer base—has the Altona in solid shape as it comes out of what everyone hopes is the other side of this unprecedented crisis.

“It was a slow process to get back to where we are normally,” Hunsader said. “We never gave up—we kept on going,” Braun added.

When the shutdown went into effect last March, the Altona immediately began serving customers via to-go orders which were permitted by the state-imposed rules. But without its dine-in crowd, bar business, catering jobs and parties, the popular supper club saw its volume drop by 80 percent, Hunsader said.

Still doing to-go orders

The Altona continues to do more to-go orders than ever before, but Hunsader said it was a significant adjustment for them at first. They had to find different ways and the best ways to deliver their tasty menu items to their customers via disposable containers.

As the pandemic set in, Braun and Hunsader also had a list of facility improvements they had planned to do. They were faced with the challenge of deciding whether to forge ahead—with rev-



Altona Supper Club owners Dave Braun and Jason Hunsader and their management team kept moving forward during 2020 despite the challenges the pandemic threw at them. They acquired another van (above) for the catering arm of their business, and also did some significant remodeling of the area in between the bar and restaurant (below).

enues greatly reduced—or to postpone or cancel those improvements.

The men have a long history of continually improving the supper club, and they decided to move forward with the projects. “We took a little risk,” Braun said. Hunsader added, “As long as you’re moving in the right direction, that’s the goal.... As long as you’re working toward it.”

The only time the Altona closed was when they decided to shut down for a couple days to redo the kitchen flooring, but they used the lack of in-house dining and reduced work load to get some even bigger projects done.

Some customers are still coming back to the Altona for the first time since the

pandemic started and they are seeing the major remodeling which was done in the area between the bar and the main dining room. The former coat room was removed (a new one was created just inside the north side entrance) and that has allowed the bar area to expand and be opened up without sacrificing any dining room space. Hunsader said they rushed to purchase the materials for the project right as the shutdown was starting, not knowing if building supply stores would be allowed to remain open.

In addition to that project, in the past year or two they have remodeled the



Altona

North Room, purchased new barstools, put up an adjacent shed for storage and added a permanent cover to the outdoor pavilion on the east side of the building. “Our goal is to use it more often,” Braun said of the pavilion, including for outdoor dining.

More people are now dining in the renovated bar area, and Hunsader and Braun have also expanded the Altona’s bar menu. That includes a selection of four different kinds of quesadillas—cheese, chicken, steak or pork—along with a wide variety of 12-inch homemade pizzas. Those items are available anytime and not just in the bar, of course.

The pandemic also has changed the Altona’s catering and party services, or at least how customers are using them. Instead of providing buffet lines for parties, events, and at company functions throughout the region, the Altona has received more requests for box lunches. Braun listed a number of area businesses and organizations which stepped up their ordering of box lunches over the past year to both reward their employees but also support the Altona as it worked to get through the challenging times. “We got back quite a bit for Christmas parties,” Braun said of the box lunch method of throwing a party. He and Hunsader both said they appreciate the support of all their customers over the past year-plus. “You’re more thankful when you’re slow like that,” Hunsader said.

Catering services offered

The Altona Supper Club continues to offer catering services within about a 45-minute drive of New Holstein, and

they have purchased a second catering van to serve those customers.

Expanding their reach even more during COVID-19, the Altona began operating a food stand at turn 14 at Elkhart Lake’s Road America race track last summer and will be back again this season. In addition to offering an outdoor bar, the stand offers such food items as pulled pork, patty melts, pizza, salads, etc.

And in the past month or so, the co-owners said they have seen a significant comeback in the Altona’s more “normal” business. Groups, family gatherings, and reunions are holding their events and/or scheduling them for the months ahead. While tables were more spread out, the Altona was largely booked solid for Easter dining and the upcoming Mother’s Day schedule is looking good as well. “It came back pretty fast,” Braun said.

One area which was slower to come back was the Altona’s lunch service from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. weekdays, but the owners said with the reopening of adjacent Honeymoon Acres this spring the lunch business has rebounded as well.

Going forward, the Altona staff will continue their aggressive cleaning and sanitizing efforts to try to keep diners safe. At the same time, the owners said they would like to spruce up the front of the building and perhaps someday soon put another outdoor seating/patio area on the south side of the building.

“We learned a lot on what to do,” Braun said in looking back over the past year. “We learned new ways. It makes you better.”