

Firewater Kitchen and Bar

A New Deep Creek Lake Gem in a Classic Setting



PHOTO BY MIKE CALHOUN

Written by: **Mary Reisinger**

For years, Brenda McDonnell and her husband Martin Heise looked at an old boathouse sitting empty on their Will O' the Wisp property. She used to say, "We've got to do something with that space." That something turned out to be Firewater Kitchen and Bar, a sparkling new addition to Deep Creek Lake's restaurants.

Brenda's experience with eateries began when she moved to McHenry, Maryland, in the 1980's, where she and her partner ran a restaurant for several years. Later, Brenda worked in food service at the Wisp Ski Resort for the Heise family, whom she describes as excellent employers interested in helping their staff develop skills. She especially credits

Martin Heise with giving her good advice on some of the practicalities of the food business such as how to regularize costs of recipes.

When the Heise family sold the ski area, Brenda launched her own place, which evolved into two businesses—Brenda's Pizzeria and Trader's Coffee House—that are still thriving.

In 2004, she married Martin Heise; they live at Will O' the Wisp, the Deep Creek Lake property his grandparents purchased when it was a modest group of rustic cottages. Martin's mother and father, Ace and Evelyn Heise, managed Will O' the Wisp, and along with some others, helped

develop winter tourism by starting the nearby ski area. As the lake became a year-round vacation spot, the Heise family transformed the original summer camp. They added a modern motel in the 1950s, a restaurant called the Four Seasons Dining Room in the 1960s, and premium condominiums in the 1970s.

When Martin decided to retire from the restaurant business in 2012, Brenda volunteered to take on the Four Seasons Room. She feels it is an enormous compliment that Martin trusted her to re-imagine a business that had been in his family for decades. By the next year, she had remodeled, expanded, and re-opened the restaurant, now called Ace's Run and Pub in honor of Martin's father.

Fast forward a few years, and that empty boathouse was calling to Brenda. Already owning and operating three restaurants didn't prevent her from contemplating adding another to the group. The first idea was a simple snack shop with a bar. However, the gorgeous setting with its water views seemed to demand a more ambitious plan, and the project grew into a restaurant and bar with ample outside and inside space.

Doug Storck of Deep Creek Design Studio and his wife Kelly put Brenda's ideas into tangible form. The old boathouse was razed, but both timber and stone were saved for reuse. A new building was designed to feature the property's expansive views of the lake at its widest point.

Construction began in the spring of 2020 on the new structure and the area around it. Driveways have been expanded and paved for easy access. Additional parking has been created near the new restaurant, and soon charging stations for electric vehicles will be added. Twenty additional docks have been installed for the convenience of boaters visiting Ace's Run or Firewater. Steps, walkways, and ramps have been put in place to connect the buildings, parking lots, docks, and beach. After a soft opening to test the systems, everything was complete and open for business by December 2020.

Firewater Kitchen and Bar, with its wood, glass, and gleaming surfaces, combines rusticity and elegance. Inside patrons can sit at a long, four-sided bar, or at tables positioned in front of windows. On the decks, outdoor



Progression of Firewater Kitchen & Bar from clearing and leveling the property to final building.

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Above: Guests enjoy the outdoor deck and 32-foot long glass-enclosed fire pit while overlooking expansive views of Deep Creek Lake.

Insets: Firewater branded square cornered ice cubes and one of the specialized cocktails.

tables and comfortably-cushioned chairs provide flexible seating arrangements.

Every detail has been carefully thought out. Both inside and outside flooring is heated (no need to shovel snow!) and tall heaters outside keep patrons comfortable in cooler temperatures. Visitors are served outside in the summer, but even in winter, some suitably-attired folks take their drinks and food outdoors to enjoy. When the weather is nice, the windows open canopy-style, giving indoor guests the feeling of being outside.

A covered “bandstand” provides space for musicians, and the occasional performances from favorite groups such as Queen City Funk and Soul are compatible with conversation. The bandstand area is popular for dining at other times. Flames flicker in a 32-foot-long glass-enclosed fire pit outside, and from a smaller one inside that produces water vapor rather than smoke.

During a discussion of possible names, Doug Storck considered the fire pit’s flames and the lake lapping at



the shore a few yards away, and suggested Firewater. The double entendre of “firewater” as a casual term for alcohol was a bonus.

Firewater Kitchen and Bar features regional draft beers and in-house craft cocktails. Staff members elevate the bar’s offerings by dehydrating and juicing fruit, and making the syrups used in the cocktails. Some glasses are enhanced with a smoked aroma. Distinctive square-cornered ice cubes, delivered by a company from Annapolis and branded on-site with the Firewater logo, are used in specialized cocktails.

Whenever possible, Brenda prefers to use local sources, and she purchases regularly from area farmers and the Garrett Growers consortium. The menu changes seasonally. The



Left: Inside patrons can sit at a four-sided bar offering regional draft beers and in-house craft cocktails.

Inset: The menu at Firewater changes seasonally but there is always a variety of seafood available.

PHOTOS BY FIREWATER KITCHEN & BAR



original concept of small plates has grown into a selection of eclectic light meals with lots of seafood.

Firewater and Brenda's other restaurants have wonderful synergy. For instance, pizza dough for Brenda's Pizzeria is made at Ace's Run where there is more space for the large equipment needed to mix and roll enough dough for 500-600 pizzas a day.

Similarly, staff members often work at more than one of the restaurants. With seasonal variation, Brenda employs 130-160 people, and she truly values them. Since housing is limited and expensive around the lake, Brenda has renovated cottages on the Will O' the Wisp property and motel rooms at the former Lake Breez Motel next door to offer employees more affordable accommodations. She provides pay above the usual scale for restaurant work, scholarships, and special training such as a pizza convention trip to Las Vegas in March of 2022. Brenda keeps in close contact with each of her four businesses, and pitches in as needed.

Brenda grew up in the Bronx, where there are *sidewalks*, so she was initially inclined to think of towns and cities as the logical places to locate businesses. However, Deep Creek Lake quickly won her over. She never tires of the natural

beauty of the place. Even walking home at night after a long day, she appreciates the moon shining over the water.

Brenda does her best every day to convey this appreciation of the area to her customers, especially at Firewater, a place that celebrates Deep Creek Lake's special ambience.

Firewater Kitchen and Bar, adjacent to Ace's Run and Pub and the Will O' the Wisp Condominiums, on Route 219 near the McHenry Bridge, 20128 Garrett Highway, 21550.

In the winter, Firewater is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays. During the summer, it opens seven days a week for longer hours.

Check the website (www.firewaterkitchen.com) or phone (301-387-6408) for up-to-date information.

