by Mitzi Palmer

Kerry Smith, kitchen manager of Tug's Casual Grill

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Tug's Casual Grill

NESTLED PERFECTLY between the River Inn and the beautiful homes of Harbor Town, Tug's Casual Grill — known to locals as simply Tug's — provides visitors an ideal winding-down spot with a mighty view of the Mississippi.

River Inn's director of operations, Don Eschelweck, describes the restaurant as casual and cozy. "We want it to be a place where people can wear shorts and a T-shirt."

Eschelweck is part of the management team that runs Tug's, River Inn — the 28-room luxury boutique hotel that anchors the restaurant — and Currents, a fine-dining restaurant in the hotel. He was approached by longtime Downtown developer and friend Henry Turley several years ago about opening the restaurants and hotel, which all came to fruition in late 2007.

"This was the last remaining piece of land in Harbor Town," notes Eschelweck, who says that in addition to the expected kinks of opening a restaurant, determining the layout was extremely tricky. "The buildings are built right to the property line, so figuring out the seating to maximize the views was challenging." So the team relied on Looney Ricks Kiss of Memphis for the architectural and interior design details.

Challenging, but rewarding. Patrons can choose to dine outside on the patio while watching tugboats pass by (as the restaurant's name suggests) or inside in the panoramic dining room, surrounded by a collection of riverboat photographs and a stained-glass art piece of a Currier and Ives print called "Midnight Race on the Mississippi."

One step into the restaurant, and it's quite clear what type of food is served. An appetizing aroma of freshly seasoned seafood fills the air as patrons gather around the five televisions to watch their favorite games.

Some of the woodwork that attributes to the warm feel of Tug's is from a Virginia textile mill built in the 1800s. The same wood is also used in the hotel's lobby.

At Tug's, the menu is heavy on appetizers and hearty bar food, and most of it is cooked on an open grill with a Cajun twist under the direction of Kerry Smith, the kitchen manager. His many signature dishes include an award-winning seafood gumbo packed with shrimp and crawfish; Bayou thin-fried catfish breaded in a creamy cornmeal-flour mixture; "The Harbor Town" grilled shrimp salad; and the spinach and artichoke dip — Eschelweck's personal favorite.

"We have great steaks, too," adds Eschelweck. "Filet mignon, New York strip, and the ribeye — all are USDA choice, reasonably priced, and hand-cut here."

It's full steam ahead at Tug's Casual Grill, a winding-down spot with a mighty view of the Mississippi.

Tug's also serves up a few Southern breakfast favorites — eggs any way you like them, pancakes, and omelettes — until 3 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. "You can actually get breakfast or lunch at 8 in the morning," says Eschelweck. "You can get a cheeseburger or eggs over easy. And the 'Tug's Famous Pancakes' are prepared like Lewis Holland's — the restaurant's principal owner — dad used to make for him when he was younger."

Happy hour is affordable and generous at Tug's. Offered daily 3–7 p.m., it features specialty drinks — including a Grape Bubble Yum Martini and a Mud Island Mojito — bottled beer, wine, highballs, and appetizers, such as the fried pickle chips, crispy onion straws, hamburger sliders, and fried oysters.

And Tuesday nights are Trivia Nights, beginning at 8:30 p.m., where guests can play to win gift cards.

One of the newest additions to Tug's and River Inn is the River Hall, located just in front of the restaurant. Built with catering capabilities from Tug's and Currents, the facility hosts events such as wedding receptions, business meals, and birthday parties.

Complementing the quaintness of Harbor Town's ambience, Tug's seats just up to 90 in the dining room and 50 outside. And according to Eschelweck, the restaurant's crowd is very diverse. "We have everything from college kids to retirees, so we try to have something that will please everyone."

Tug's Casual Grill, 51 Harbor Town Square, 260-3344, tugsmemphis.com.