

"What Happened Here Doesn't Happen Often": Mac's Reflects on 40 Years

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
December 11 2023 4:50 PM



1983



Now



ALTON - Mac's on Third Street in Alton has come a long way since it opened in 1983 with only the front bar. The legendary Alton business is going strong in 2023 as it marks its 40th anniversary.

The business opened its doors at 3:15 p.m. on Dec. 6, 1983, at the 315 Belle Street location with 2,500 square feet.

It is a rarity for a bar to survive that long and Mac and Rob Lenhardt, the owners, are proud of how far they have come.

Mac Lenhardt said when the business opened, he often worried about making the \$250 a month payment on the loan to start, but with extreme fortitude, the business continued to grow and prosper.

Mac and Rob have done much of the construction work on Mac's and Mac also thanked his long-time construction associate - Joe Haufe - a master mechanic and carpenter. Joe and Mac joined forces in 1987 and have been together ever since.

As buildings became available downtown, the Lenhardts purchased them, all to make Alton a better place for others to do business and a special place for people near and far away to visit.

Over the years, many famous musical acts visited the stages at Mac's from Jon Waite, Marshal Tucker, the Atlanta Rhythm Section, Badfinger, and one of Mac's all-time favorites - Gin Blossoms - and much more for special occasions.

The Annual Kentucky Derby Party is always the biggest each year for Mac's and thousands visit the location and are in the streets, normally with a headliner band after the Derby ends. The off-track betting has become a big business for Mac's over the years.

A Look At Mac's History:

The business has survived multiple floods that hit the Downtown Alton area hard and the COVID-19 pandemic, which stymied many businesses. In 2019, there was much work done to the front bar and the floor was replaced with more durable materials. The Biergarten was added in 1989 and in 2008 and 2020 there were updates.

In 2019, new hoods and backsplash were added to the kitchen.

In 2022, ghost kitchens were added to bring more options to Alton. Mini Corral, perfectly Southern Fried Chicken, Firebelly wings, Mr. Beat Burger and Buddy V. Cakes have been added to the menu.

In 2022-2023, additional innovations took place at Mac's. Now there is a Sunday Brunch from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., and a Saturday Breakfast from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. On Mondays, Kids Eat Free from 3 to 8 p.m. and Wednesday night there is a Chicken Buffet. Mac's On Fourth was also added to the lineup and the convenience store carries many items and is very appreciated by those who work or reside in Downtown Alton.



Also in 2023 and coming in 2024, there will be new locations for Mac's. Mac's Pizza and Poker is located in Godfrey and Mac's on Ferguson is coming to Wood River in 2024.

Mac's will also open an Events Center in the old Tony's Parking Lot area in 2024. Rob said the goal is to have several thousand people in Downtown Alton for big-name concerts and other large gatherings.

The Lenhardts plan to add a competition-style barbecue location in the old Don Huber Clock Shop sometime in 2024, too and Rob says they are looking at other areas for locations, possibly in Jerseyville, Grafton or East Alton or more, but to date, this is uncertain and market-driven. The Fourth Street barbecue location will also have a patio.



Mac Lenhardt said Derby Day is always one of his favorite times in the business and what he loves most about the day is the array of women in dresses and Derby hats.

“Derby Day is our busiest day of the year,” Mac said.

St. Patrick’s Day is also very busy at Mac’s, along with other special occasions throughout the year. Alton-Marquette classes even have a special reunion there each year and there are also many other special events year to year.

Rob Lenhardt has shown a lot of innovation with his wife, Julie, in recent years. Mac Lenhardt said he is so proud of his family and that Rob now runs the day-to-day operation at Mac’s. Many of the new ideas for the business come from Rob.

“I just wanted to take it from the 1980s, 1990s to 2000s to today,” he said.

Rob thanked his father for always believing in him during tough times.

“What happened here doesn’t happen very often,” Rob said. “My dad could have easily walked away, but he stayed with it.”

Rob also said he is blessed that his wife, Julie, has helped with many of the technical things of the business.

“She is college-educated and is capable of doing things I am not capable of,” he said.

Mac has a grandson - Cooper - who is now 3 years old. Rob hopes to continue to develop the business and in about 20 years he will see what his son wants to do.

One of the things Rob loves most is seeing Mac on a completely other side - Mac, the grandfather.

“My son has brought out another special side of my dad that I sometimes didn’t get to see,” Rob said.

For now, Rob and Mac are buckled in to try anchoring the Downtown Alton area for another several decades.

“I am very excited about our future,” Rob said, with much coming in 2024 and beyond for Mac’s.