

# O'Keefe's Irish Pub celebrates 30 years



TOM BENITEZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Andrew O'Keefe, owner of O'Keefe's Irish Pub & Restaurant, a mainstay in downtown Tavares, transformed his father's pool hall and bar into the iconic eatery it is today, famous for its beer selection, Irish fare and a relaxing view of Lake Dora.

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**TAVARES** — When O'Keefe's opened in 1984, it was little more than a pool hall with some pool tables and a bar.

Fast-forward 30 years and O'Keefe's Irish Pub & Restaurant remains a Tavares icon that's revered by locals and visitors alike.

In an era when restaurants have momentary success and bars fade just as quickly, O'Keefe's has remained a mainstay on the Tavares landscape. Folks come from all over to visit the family-owned Irish pub and restaurant, which is famous for its beer selection, Irish fare and a relaxing view of Lake Dora.

After 30 years of serving customers, there have been plenty of ups and downs, including a 1995 fire that nearly leveled the place. Today, O'Keefe's is just as popular as it was decades ago.

Bill Neron, the city's economic-development director, said O'Keefe's is popular because it continually turns out high-quality menu items at fair prices. It's been a back-

bone in the downtown Tavares scene, said Neron, who eats there at least once a week.

"O'Keefe's has been the granddaddy, setting the pace for quality and service for the several new eating establishments that have opened in the Tavares downtown entertainment district in the last seven years," he said.

Frank O'Keefe opened the bar in the city's former post office at 115 S. Rockingham Ave. In 1987, O'Keefe's son Andrew, an accomplished chef, transformed the bar into a restaurant. About a decade later, a devastating electrical fire nearly destroyed the building. Closing for good was never an option. The O'Keefes rebuilt and made it better than ever.

Andrew O'Keefe, who is now the owner, said he's gratified to be part of the community and happy to be a leader in downtown Tavares' growth.

"Where everybody used to talk about Mount Dora, they're now talking about Tavares," said O'Keefe, 51. "Now it's kind of like the place to be in the area."

Today, locals can count on O'Keefe's for

fundraisers that draw big crowds. Every Christmas, hundreds attend the annual Christmas celebration that brings in scores of toys that are later distributed by the state Department of Children & Families.

## Family affair

Locals can also depend on the annual St. Patrick's Day celebration and others. More than 1,800 people have joined the bar's mug club.

The restaurant-bar continues to be family owned and operated. Brothers, sisters and spouses all lend a hand. O'Keefe said his own kids — Lauren and Emily, 15; Mary, 13; and Aidan, 11 — are also helping in the family business.

As for the future, O'Keefe said he's not willing to push any of his children into taking over the family business. If it does, he wants it to happen naturally.

"Even if I don't own it, I hope that somebody else keeps it going," he said. "I don't feel anyone should feel obligated to take over the family business."