

Oldest distillery in United States on original site

By DICK LIPSEY
Associated Press Writer

WESTON, Mo. (AP) — A small plant in northwest Missouri provides a reminder of America's pioneer heritage and a link to one commodity that had a legendary role in the opening of the West.

No, not wagons or horseshoes or six-guns. Whiskey.

Whiskey has been produced on this site, now the McCormick Distilling Co., since before the Civil War. A listing on the National Register of Historic Sites calls this the oldest distillery in the country still operating on its original site.

"This was a natural stopping place for wagon trains coming through," said Annette Regan, a spokeswoman for the distillery. "One of the popular products was whiskey."

Few in the west

McCormick is one of the few distilleries west of the Mississippi River. It opened in 1856 in the Platte Valley in the rolling hills northwest of Kansas City.

The distillery is just a mile from the historic Missouri River town of Weston, founded in 1837 when the Platte Purchase opened 2 million acres of Indian land for settlers. By 1853 it was the second-largest port in Missouri, with more than 5,000 people. Today it's a town of about 1,400 people, several antiques stores, restaurants and bed-and-breakfasts.

Between 1853 and 1880 the town was devastated by a series of fires and floods, the last of which left the river two miles away.

"Weston never grew much after that," Regan says.

Spring found by explorers

The distillery's natural limestone spring was one of the springs found by the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1804, according to a tour guide, Dorothy Ellis.

The tour includes a large, ancient cave that provides welcome relief from the heat on a sweltering day and in which visitors can see a slide show about the history of the distillery and the region.

The cave, with its own small spring, was originally used to store meat after a slaughterhouse was built on the site in 1840 by an enterprising businessman from Weston, Ben Holladay.

As America's western migration picked up, Ellis said, Holladay soon saw the potential for another business to serve the wagon trains passing through. "In 1856, he turned it into the Blue Springs Distillery Co.," Ellis said. "He sold whiskey all over the country, especially in saloons in the Old West."

Several different owners

The distillery has changed hands several times through the years.

George Shawhan bought it in 1895 from the Holladay family.

Shawhan owned it during Prohibition, when alcohol was banned in the United States, but he found a loophole in the law that kept him in business.

"During Prohibition you could sell whiskey to doctors and druggists for medical purposes," Ellis said.

It was after Prohibition, when the distillery was bought by Isadore Singer, that it finally acquired the McCormick name from a competitor in nearby Waldron that went out of business.

The distillery was acquired in 1950 by Midwest Grain Products of nearby Atchison, Kan., which owned it until 1992, when it was sold to a group of private investors.

The distillery is no longer in active use, however, and operations now are limited to aging and bottling whiskey and other liquor products.

Fermenting tanks there

But visitors still can see the two 17,000-gallon capacity fermenting tanks, where 12,000 gallons of mash and 100 pounds of yeast were mixed to ferment for three days.

The tour includes the packaging plant, where four separate lines run at the same time. Visitors can watch as liter bottles of whiskey are dropped into cases that roll off the line at the rate of about one every five seconds.

The distillery also has a gift shop, where visitors can buy souvenirs, as well as McCormick products. Visitors can sample the product — but only one sample per person — for a 10-cent fee.

With about 80 employees, McCormick remains among the smaller of the nation's 57 distilleries, according to the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, an industry trade group in Washington, D.C.

"We're not Seagram's, and we're not Hiram Walker," Regan said. "Nor do we want to be."

Exporting vodka to Russia

But in a venture that seems about as likely as selling sand to Saudi Arabia, McCormick — once known mainly for its novelty as one of the oldest and smallest distilleries in the country — is exporting vodka to Russia.

"McCormick is a recognized brand in Russia," Regan said.

McCormick's two biggest markets in Russia are the cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow, said Ron Schultz, the company's export manager.

The company has a market in Russia and the new nations of the former Soviet Union because of internal tariffs among those countries and the use of more grain for food production rather than vodka, Schultz said.

The company, which 10 or 15 years ago sold its products only in Missouri and a few adjacent states, now sells in more than 40 states and 40 foreign countries.

"We're actively striving to go worldwide," Schultz said.

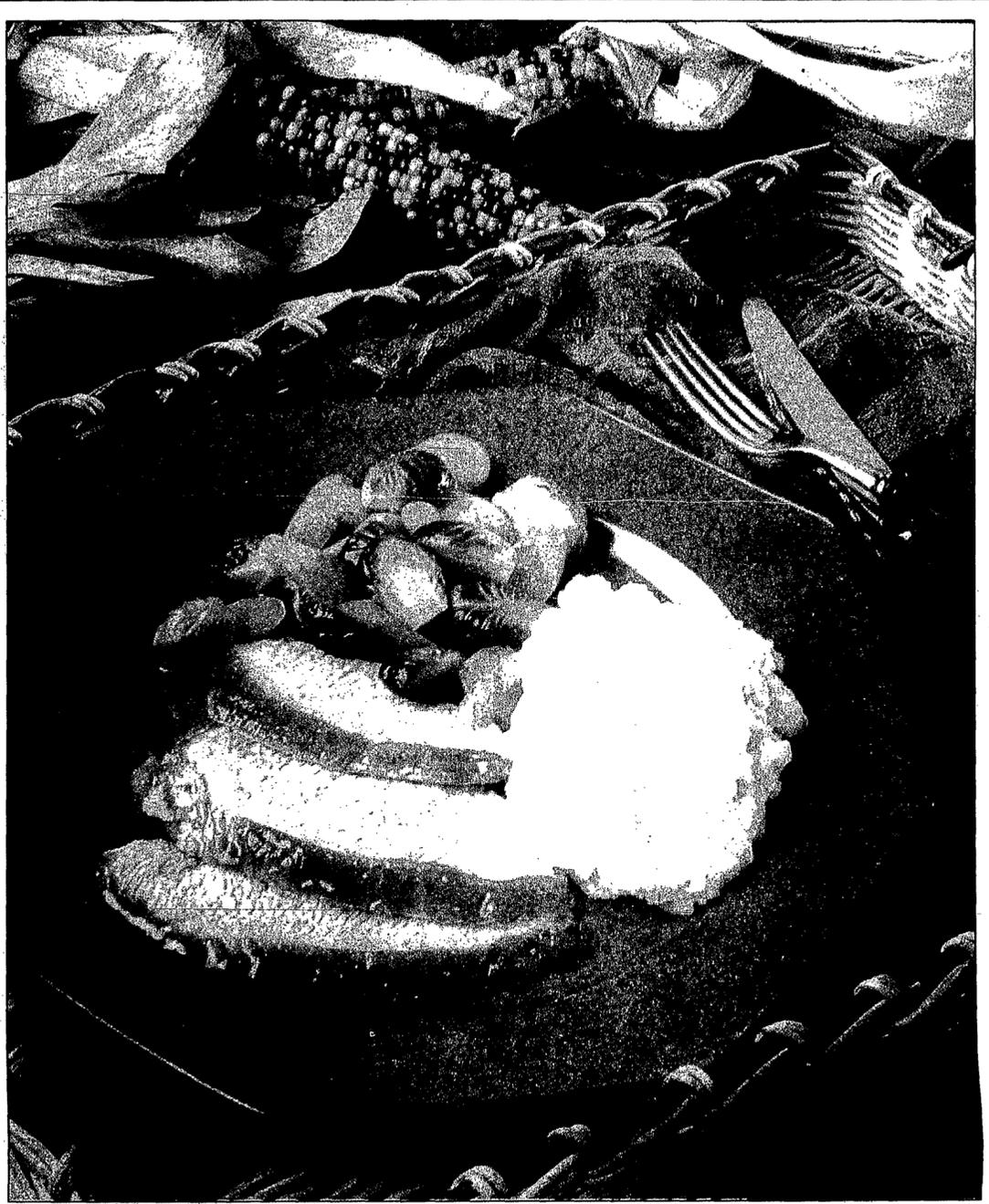


Photo Provided
FABULOUS FALL MEALS: Turkey can be a light alternative to other meats in dishes this fall. Instead of the traditional Salisbury Steak try making it with ground turkey and adding Horseradish Potatoes on the side. Shown here is a Cherry Glazed Turkey Breast with mashed potatoes. For recipes, see Page C-3.

Sushi not a cinch to put together

How to make sushi at home

By MARK MERCHANT
Ottawa News Service

YARMOUTHPORT, Mass. — I have no fear of sushi.

Eating little pieces of raw fish placed artistically on top of specially-made sushi rice, wrapped in rice and seaweed or just raw fish alone — it's just not a problem for me.

In America, sushi and sashimi (sliced raw fish served with a variety of condiments) has come into vogue in the past 20 years, yet the very word still elicits a violent response — usually something like "yuck" or "gross." But it shouldn't. Every year Americans devour tons of raw clams and oysters; not much different from sushi and sashimi. And fresh, raw fish does not carry the sometimes repulsive fishy smell that shellfish does.

Sushi is still a victim of misconceptions. The most common: it's all raw fish.

"Basically, sushi is what you get when you put rice and something else together," explains Alda Watanabe, co-owner of Inaho Japanese Restaurant in Yarmouthport, Mass. "Usually, that something else is raw fish, but that's not solely what it is."

For sushi is also made with vegetables, pickles, tofu and eggs.

I have experienced all types of sushi, from the basic toro (tuna) to the exceptionally challenging sea urchin. I wanted to take the next step — making it.

Key to the sushi experience is the preparation. Sushi chefs, you see, don't just hack willy-nilly at fish, toss it on a plate and hand it to you — they create a piece of art. In fact, sushi chefs spend a lifetime perfecting their craft. Not only is the fish supposed to be top-quality, there are also hard and fast rules about its presentation.

With this in mind, I arrived at Inaho Japanese Restaurant, determined to become an instant sushi chef. I arrived confident, but soon realized I was in over my head when I saw exactly

By MARK MERCHANT
Ottawa News Service

YARMOUTHPORT, Mass. — Many supermarkets sell Japanese rice. Follow the directions, and you'll have a perfect rice for sushi.

But you'll probably have to go to a Japanese market to find nori, wasabi, tofu and other ingredients.

It's hard to write up sushi and sashimi recipes, since the essential ingredient — fish — is raw. But there is a secret to making the rice and the dipping sauces. So, if you're brave enough to try it yourself, below are some tips and recipes.

But if all else fails, go to a good Japanese restaurant and sit at the bar. Talk to the sushi chef and try different things. You might actually enjoy it.

Cutting the fish

With a very sharp heavy knife, cut a fish fillet crosswise at an angle in ¼-inch strips. If using tuna fillets, cut into ½-inch strips.

Key to good sushi and sashimi is the fish. Some types of fish simply don't taste good raw. Others are excellent. Novice sushi eaters should stay away from whitefish (like cod) and go for the tuna. But make sure it's fresh.

Tuna is the most popular fish, possibly because its taste and texture is a lot like rare beef. But other favorites served at Inaho are yellowtail, fluke and salmon.

Sushi Rice

Sushi rice is a combination of rice and a vinegar dressing.

For the vinegar dressing:
¼ cup rice vinegar or 3 Tbsp. mild white vinegar
3½ Tbsp. sugar
2½ tsp. salt
1½ Tbsp. mirin (sweet sake) or 1 Tbsp. pale, dry sherry
For the rice:
2 cups Japanese or unconverted rice
2½ cups cold water

The best way to make sushi rice is in a Japanese rice cooker. In the absence of one, thoroughly wash in cold water and drain 2 cups Japanese or unconverted rice. Combine with cold water in a 2-quart saucepan and let soak for 30 minutes. Bring to a boil over high heat. Cover the pan and reduce heat to medium; cook until all the water is absorbed. Transfer the rice to a large ceramic or metal bowl. Immediately pour on the vinegar dressing, and stir with a fork or wooden spoon. The rice is ready to use when it has cooled to room temperature.

Making the sushi

Necessary to making the maki, or sushi rolls, is a bamboo mat used to roll the rice into the seaweed. You'll also need the nori, or seaweed, and of course, the sushi rice.

Maki Sushi

Lay flat a square piece of nori. Wet your hand, take up a small handful of rice and spread it over the nori to a thickness of ¼- to ½-inch. In the center of the rice, place your filling of vegetable and/or fish strips. Roll. Keep trying; experiment with handling the nori. This takes lots of practice.

"You need to take charge. Make the roll do what you want."

Sure. But making the roll fall apart is not what I want it to do.

In the beginning, it's a combination of formula and concentration. Lots of concentration.

Take a piece of nori (seaweed sheets — the fish and rice are rolled in), wet your hands, take a handful of rice and spread it over the nori — carefully, now, so as not to rip the paper-thin seaweed. Add a touch of wasabi (a hot horseradish paste), the fish or vegetable filling and then roll.

In my case, the next step was to watch it disintegrate, but normally the next step is the cutting. Sushi rolls — called maki — are cut into six pieces. The key here is not to cut slowly. Do it quickly, pulling the knife toward you as you cut, or else you end up with a pile of mangled seaweed, rice and fish. If all goes well, you have a colorful, healthful Japanese delicacy.

Then there is the service, as important and traditional as the preparation. Typically, the eldest male at the table is served first. Sushi is served on a plate with wasabi, a green horseradish paste, and shaved ginger. When served, the wasabi and ginger are always at the bottom of the plate.

Even though there is wasabi on the sushi when it's served, many sushi eaters add wasabi to their soy sauce — the traditional salty, black soybean sauce you dip your sushi in. Just enough, and your sushi gets an exciting zip. Too much and your sinuses clear up fast.

If you've never tried sushi before and have no affinity for raw fish, I suggest you try one of the vegetable sushi mentioned above or an ebi (shrimp).

Besides the mistaken idea that sushi is just raw fish, another common misconception about Japanese food is that it all consists of raw fish. That's not true, for there are many delicious cooked things to choose from — such as batter-fried shrimp (tempura), chicken cutlets (torikatsu) and teriyaki.

My attempt at making sushi went well, but two hours later, I still was nowhere near being a professional sushi chef.

More franchisers discovering pasta

From The Wall Street Journal

Increasingly, spaghetti, macaroni and similar pasta items crop up on the menus of fast-food restaurants. Also, several newer chains feature pasta as their principal product.

Fazoli's Restaurants, a pasta chain franchised by a unit of Seed Restaurant Group Inc., Lexington, Ky., says that it has grown to 135 units from only five early in 1990. The chain says it now has outlets in 17 states, including 41 outlets owned by franchisees. "We aim to be at about 500 restaurants by the year 1999," says James F. Koch, Seed's chief financial officer.

The big Arby's roast-beef chain, overseen by a Triarc Cos. unit, plans to test dual-branded outlets that combine the Arby's format and P.T. Noodles, a pasta concept originated by a consultant. The first two dual units, in Salt Lake City and Los Angeles, will open this month or next,

says Laura Widmer, an Arby's spokeswoman in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. "We expect pasta to do well," she adds. "It's a very easy concept to execute."

But noodles don't work for everyone. "There's a very spotty track record for pasta concepts," says Rajani Chaudhry, publisher of Chain Update, a Mount Prospect, Ill., industry newsletter.

Indeed, Monterey Pasta Co. last month closed 21 of 41 units built in 1994. But the company now is testing a fancier decor — with china instead of paper plates — and will soon attempt a comeback. The chain, which includes eight franchised units, offers such dishes as lemon-pepper linguine with sun-dried tomatoes.

Restaurants of America Inc., the Minneapolis operator of a restaurant named "Hulk Hogan's Pastamania!" is considering selling franchises. The menu includes "Hulkaroni," pasta pieces shaped like the wrestler in various poses.