

BEHIND THE BAR



Jerry Szawerda

Small Bar, Big Heart

56 Main Street Restaurant 56 Main St., Springfield • (802) 885-6987
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Owner Jerry Szawerda may describe his restaurant, 56 Main Street, as being what is “probably the smallest bar in Vermont,” but what it might lack in square footage, it makes up for in hospitality expertise.

Szawerda and his wife, Robin, own the family-run restaurant right on the small town’s main thoroughfare (thus the name), and have a long history in the business.

“I’ve always been in the restaurant business,” Szawerda says. “My wife and I had our first restaurant when I was 24-years-old in 1980, and my father-in-law basically taught me how to tend bar.”

The couple ran a popular seafood restaurant in Wallingford, Conn., for 14 years before the pull of the Green Mountain State drew them north. The couple has called Vermont home for 22 years now.

“It’s a neat old building,” Szawerda says of the restaurant. “It was originally a bank block building, but it’s been a lot of things over the years – all kinds of retail shops, especially in the heyday of Springfield in the 40s, 50s and 60s, with brick walls and big iron beams and a high ceiling with café lanterns.”

When 56 Main Street first opened, the Szawerdas were operating on a tight budget. They opted to decorate the space with what they had on-hand, giving it a welcoming, warm feel.

“We spiffed everything up and we’ve been making improvements for 11 years,” Szawerda says. The result? Great food at good prices, no TV, very soft music, excellent service and four stools along what is a friendly, knowledgeable and what may be “the smallest bar in Vermont.”

What’s your favorite part about working behind the bar?

“It’s fun to be asked for an old drink. I don’t know all the modern drinks – sometimes I have to look them up, but I don’t get many requests for odd drinks. If somebody asks me for a Sidecar or a perfect Manhattan or an Old Fashioned – I can do that with one eye closed. Here’s an example: When I was in the Air Force when I was a kid, I used to like a Harvey Wallbanger, which has an unusual taste. You don’t really hear about them anymore. It was more of a 70s drink. Well, a guy came in said, ‘you won’t know how to make this, but I want a Harvey Wallbanger.’ Well I had an old bottle of Galliano

that I probably had for 10 years. I had that drink on his table in two minutes and the guy was flabbergasted. It’s basically a Screwdriver with a little Galliano floated on top – a very delicate, licorice flavor.”

Share a behind-the-bar secret.

“You always want to get an exact pour – never too weak or too strong. We free pour, so you have to make sure you don’t overfill the glass. If you do, it makes for an unprofessional looking drink when it gets to the table. The mentality is that if you over-pour, you don’t want to throw it out. However, if you add more, you can’t get the glass to table without spilling it. For a more professional look, we’ll take the extra and serve it on the rocks in a side glass. That way your customer still gets value, and it’s still a professional looking cocktail with nice garnish.”

What is the philosophy of your bar program?

“We try to cater to locals first. We have a strong local following – we have a dinner club, a lunch club, a birthday club. All the villages around us also support us really well. We cater to locals and their families, with good pricing and good offerings. We like to think we have something for everyone. There’s a movie theater nearby, and people might hit us for a burger or some Mexican before catching a movie. Our motto is ‘do it right every time, every table.’ It brings a lot of repeat business.” ☒



Frostbite

- 1 ounce vanilla vodka
- ½ ounce white crème de cacao
- 1 splash blue curacao
- Heavy cream

Combine all ingredients, shake, garnish with a maraschino cherry and serve in a tall zombie glass with ice.

Written by Bill Burke | Photography by Matthew Thorsen