

Restoring a Part of History

Dan and Nancy Viste rebuild a crumbling mill into a destination business that draws busloads of tourists

On May 5, 1992, Dan and Nancy Viste gazed upon the abandoned, sun-warmed stone mill and saw exciting potential. Big Mazomanie boosters, the Vistes saw the old mill as the kind of attraction that could help transform the small community of 1,500 into a tourist destination. The mill had just been placed on the National Register of Historic Places along with 34 other downtown historic structures. The Viste's purchased the mill and transformed it into a business never conceived by the Milwaukee & Mississippi Railroad in 1857. Their vision was to convert the mill into a restaurant, bakery and gift shop.

Their challenging restoration of a landmark sandstone grist mill, with portions dating to 1857, had many twists and turns, and several surprises, including the partial collapse of the two-foot thick north wall. The Vistes turned the crumbling mill into an award winning restoration, receiving a prestigious Certificate of Commendation from the Wisconsin State Historical Society. The "Old Feed Mill" restaurant opened after three years of restoration and renovation by area construction firms and by the Viste family itself. The restaurant was quickly awarded a Cornucopia Award for Best New Restaurant by Madison's Capital Times Newspaper.

In addition to the renovations required for their restaurant operation, they installed a small roller mill to make custom flour, a reminder of the days of Lynch and Walker and the beginnings of Mazomanie. Visitors can watch as a glass-enclosed flour mill, manufactured between 1880 and 1920, grinds the flour for the bread. Some of the mill's own wheels and pulley gear have been retained, along with an ancient crank cash register from an Ashland department store, a massive old pay desk from a San Francisco hotel and a corn separator. The family captured the aura of the 138-year-old mill, refinishing most the interior. All of the old beams and studding are still there, along with the thick brown sandstone exterior walls with the original but painted plaster.

The Millstone Mercantile Gift Shop also opened that year and has since expanded and relocated to the second floor because of its success. Many specialty breads from the "Amazing Grains Bakery," located inside the "Whistle Stop Café," are sold at the restaurant. These breads are made from organic, locally grown wheat and rye.

Motivated by their respect for heritage and basic Midwestern values the Vistes have restored the building and the sense of tradition its history represents. From the antique buggy used for display in the gift shop to the restored eclectic dinner tables in the restaurant, forgotten treasures come to life at The Old Feed Mill.