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At **McCoole's at the Historic Red Lion Inn**, guests can expect fantastic food and drink, a connection to the area's rich past, and more than a few surprises.
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Jan Hench, longtime proprietor of McCoole's

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Still Making History

BY BILL DONAHUE | PHOTOS BY JODY ROBINSON

At **McCoole's at the Historic Red Lion Inn**, guests can expect fantastic food and drink, a connection to the area's rich past, and more than a few surprises.



Jan Hench admits that history bored her when she was a high school student. As an adult, however, she is "enthralled" by it. Not only does she sit on the board of directors for the Quakertown Historical Society, but she's also the proprietor of McCoole's at the Historic Red Lion Inn, a Bucks County establishment that predates the birth of the United States.

Founded in the 1740s by proprietor Walter McCoole, McCoole's has played a central role in historic events and the lives of notable people. The building served as a meeting place for the organizers of the Fries Rebellion between 1799 and 1800, and it was also a stop on the Underground Railroad from the late 18th century to the end of the Civil War. Eric Knight, the author of the 1940 children's novel *Lassie Come-Home*, used to dine at the inn, often with his dog, Toots, who inspired the courageous canine of Knight's fiction.

"A connection to the past is important to me," says Hench, who has owned and operated McCoole's for 21 years. "When I found out all these important events happened here, in this area, I felt it was important that it stayed alive and had a viable place for people to come and learn about it. I find it fascinating that people can have someplace where they can come to physically see and read about the things that connect us to the past."

Stepping foot into McCoole's, located in Quakertown's old downtown, delivers a one-of-a-kind experience for visitors. The interior is elegant yet down to earth, featuring a mix of stone walls, mosaic flooring, and rich woods. Historic artwork, photos, and other paraphernalia adorn the walls, and many visitors are enamored with the bar area, especially the punched-tin ceiling.

"We love it when people come here for the first time," Hench says. "They put their phones down, talk about everything around them, enjoy the ambience, and have an overall relaxing time. That's the best compliment we get, when people say, 'I used to pass this place all the time but never stopped in. I didn't expect all this to be here.' Then they come back again."

While the historic ambience is certainly one of the property's most unique attributes, McCoole's is best known for its specific brand of food and drink, including house-brewed beers. Guest favorites include various burgers with unique toppings, steaks, and seafood options such as the crab-and-shrimp melt, the clam chowder made to order, and the fish and chips, which is made with McCoole's 1799 Rebel Ale.

Hench's personal favorite: the fish tacos.

"Just like people tell me they're shocked when they come inside and see what it's like in here, they're surprised when they find out how good the food is," she adds. "Everything is made to order, so we can customize most of the menu for anybody who has any dietary restrictions. The chicken is hormone free; I pick up the poultry and other ingredients from the farmer's market myself because I want to make sure we have the freshest, safest food possible.

"We put a lot of energy into our food menu and craft cocktails," she continues. "For anyone who hasn't been here, they can expect good food that is fresh and made to order, with nice portions. I'm very proud of what we have created. We also have a nice outdoor patio, which we keep open until late October or whenever the weather gets too yucky."

McCoole's also continues to function as a working inn, with 16 rooms available for rent. Hench says the inn has never closed since its founding nearly 200 years ago. Considering the property's storied past, it's no surprise that staff and even some patrons say they have encountered some eyebrow-raising remnants of a bygone era—*ghosts*, in other words. Various paranormal investigators have explored the property over the years in search of spirits. Some have found evidence of the otherworldly, according to Hench.

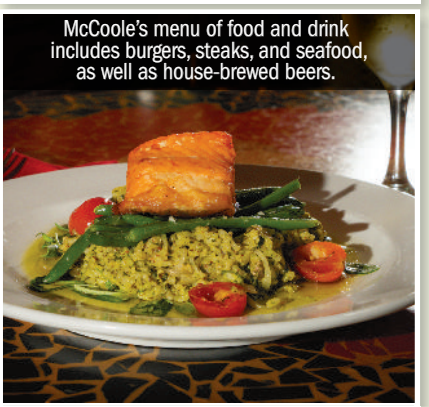
"I don't search around for them, but the ghosts are definitely here," she



The elegant yet down-to-earth interior featuring stone walls, mosaic flooring, and rich woods. Historic artwork, photos, and other paraphernalia adorn the walls.







McCoole's menu of food and drink includes burgers, steaks, and seafood, as well as house-brewed beers.



adds. "People have seen things, heard things, felt things. You cannot explain some of the things that have happened. People have seen reflections in mirrors, orbs in photos. Sometimes you leave at night and the bar is clean and in the morning you come in and there are glasses on the bar. How else does that happen?"

Right next door to the restaurant and inn is McCoole's Arts & Events Place, which is a popular destination for weddings and other special events. Once a thriving theater, the building hosts children's theater camps in the summer, as well as unique gatherings throughout the year. Recently, for example, the Halloween Dinner Theater Experience featured a reading of Edgar Allan Poe's signature story, "The Raven."

A longtime theater enthusiast herself, Hench is excited to host more one-of-a-kind events at the Arts & Events Place and find other ways to grow the business. Having started brewing her own beer in 2012, Hench will soon open a brewery and taproom across the street so patrons can have a dedicated space to enjoy McCoole's house-made craft beers, ciders, and other adult libations.

Hench and her "amazing" team have worked hard to continue the McCoole's story. There could be another secret to McCoole's continued success apart from hard work. Hench does not discount the role of destiny.

"I was born to be in this business," she says. "I was born in the Year of the Rooster, and my personality traits have tailor-made me for the hospitality industry. I'm creative. I'm hands on. I'm outgoing. I get along with people very well. For 21 years I've been here, through the pandemic, through recession, through everything else, and I love that we've been able to keep it going." ■

McCoole's at the Historic Red Lion Inn

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