



FRIED GREEN TOMATOES

STORY BY RICH BELMONT

PHOTOS BY VANOSDOL PHOTOGRAPHICS, ROBERT KEELING, RICH BELMONT, AND BRYCE PARKS

Perhaps some of you older readers remember the 1991 movie Fried Green Tomatoes. It starred Kathy Bates, Jessica Tandy, Mary Stuart Masterson and Mary-Louise Parker and was nominated for two academy awards. If you are a foodie you will probably recall fried green tomatoes were a specialty at the Whistle Stop Cafe.



Well, I can tell you fried green tomatoes have been a specialty of the house at Fried Green Tomatoes in Galena, IL for the past 21 years. That's when Fred Bonnet took over the restaurant in the Jo Daviess County Poor Farm and renamed it after the now famous green tomato.

Now people come from all over the country to enjoy Fred's specialty. First, Fred has produce suppliers who hold back tomatoes from fully ripening. Then his cooks lightly bread and sauté the green tomato slices in olive oil, cover with marinara sauce and mozzarella then bake them until the cheese is melted.

Fred purchased the Dowling Building on Main Street in Galena in 2004. After doing extensive renovations he moved his restaurant there from the County Poor House. The building has a very interesting history.



Residents and frequent visitors to Galena know the Dowling House on Diagonal Street is the oldest residence in the city. John Dowling built the limestone, two story house in 1826-1827. He lived upstairs and used the downstairs as a trading post.

What is not widely known is that John Dowling also owned the Dowling Building on Main Street. That building was constructed in 1838. It is not known exactly when but sometime after that Mr. Dowling wrote his name on an upstairs wall. It's still there and when you visit your server can show it to you.

Over the years this building has been many things. At one time it was a knife and pistol repair shop and for many years part of the building was a monument store. In 1854 it was a leather store owned by Jesse Root Grant, father of President Ulysses S. Grant. After graduating from the US Military Academy at West Point, U.S. Grant moved to Galena to help in the family store. Frank Owen, a former mayor of Galena, ran a saloon in the upstairs of the building in 1900.

The upstairs was also home to a theater operated by a then famous actor Joseph Jefferson. During the time Jefferson stayed in Galena he staged a play called Our American Cousin. That play would later be shown at the Ford Theater in Washington, DC and was the play President Abraham Lincoln went to see the night he was assassinated.

In more recent years the building was a sports outfitter, antique store and drug store.

Fred has done an excellent job of preserving this rich history. You are invited to walk around and check out the various artifacts. Just inside the front door the butler is at your service. He is the most photographed item in the restaurant! Just to the left of the front door is an antique butcher's cabinet. In the main dining room in between four brick columns hangs a genuine Marie Antoinette crystal chandelier.

The bar is a really cool place. Remember I said this building was once a sports outfitter? So check out the upside down canoe over the bar. There is also quite a story behind the naked lady painting behind the bar. Legend has it this painting was hanging in a speakeasy visited by the Chicago bootlegger Al Capone. There was an argument and in typical mobster fashion it was settled with a little gunfire. A stray bullet went through the leg of the naked lady. The alleged bullet hole is still there!

Fried Green Tomatoes is sort of a combination steakhouse, East Coast Seafood joint, Midwest comfort food place and Italian restaurant. And the specialties from each of these venues are excellent!



The staff are all seasoned veterans of the restaurant business. First among them is Executive Chef Steve Roussel (pronounced Russel). He has been in restaurants since he was 14. He was a cook at The

Point and at Bricktown Brewery both in Dubuque. He has been a line cook and Sous Chef at Fried Green Tomatoes for 8 years and was promoted to Executive Chef one year ago. The front of the house is well organized and run efficiently by co-managers Lisa Hatfield and Regina Zalladares.

All dinners are served with salad and bread. The side salad is made from field greens with no iceberg lettuce and is dressed with a raspberry vinaigrette. If you are like me and find this dressing to be a little too sweet you can ask your server for ranch, balsamic or poppy seed.

The bread is a delicious round loaf topped with a generous amount of grated parmesan cheese. It is accompanied by a very tasty olive oil infused with rosemary and peppercorns for dipping.

You are missing out if you don't start your dinner with some of the appetizers. Here is a listing of a few of them just to get you a little excited:

Steak Martini – tenderloin steak tips embedded in mashed potatoes and topped with bacon, blue cheese and sweet port wine glaze.



Mussels – a whole pound of Prince Edward Island farm raised mussels steamed in white wine, garlic, chorizo and roasted tomatoes.

Escargot – farm raised snails baked in garlic and butter. (Fun Fact: the technical term for snail farming is Heliculture pronounced helly-see-culture).



Beef Carpaccio – (kahr-paht-choh in Italian) raw beef tenderloin sliced thin and placed on a dish with lemon, olive oil and capers. Since the meat is served raw it must be extremely fresh. All of the beef is hand-cut daily.

Some of the Comfort Food Entrées include:



Tuscan Mac N Cheese – Italian sausage, roasted peppers and tortelloni pasta tossed with smoked Gouda and gorgonzola. (Fun Fact: tortelloni is simply a larger size of tortellini pasta. In Italian any word ending in "ini" means small and "oni" means large).



Lobster Ravioli – Squid Ink Striped Lobster Ravioli. The black stripes on the ravioli are squid ink which adds a slight salty or briny flavor

Spaghetti and Meatballs – the spaghetti is tossed in a made-from-scratch marinara. The meatballs come from Fontanini: a Chicago company started in 1960 famous for all sorts of Italian foods especially sausages and meatballs.

Our Famous Lasagna – cheese, ground beef and mild Italian sausage stuffed between lasagna noodles and hand rolled.

Mile-High Meatloaf – combination beef and pork caramelized with ketchup and brown sugar, then covered with a bourbon sauce.

The Seafood Entrées are so good. If you close your eyes you might think you are in a sea shanty next to the ocean. Some of the standouts are:

Pesto Salmon – salmon encrusted with macadamia nut basil pesto accompanied by asparagus.

Fresh Sea Scallops – East Coast scallops seared and served over sweet pea and pancetta risotto.

Cedar Planked Walleye – the walleye is delicious and it so mild! You don't even know you are eating fish. It tastes so good because it's finished with brown butter and candied pecans.



The steaks are high quality restaurant choice grade. They are all served to your desired temperature. The grilled Bone-In Ribeye is over a pound and is very popular. So is the huge full 20 ounce Jack Daniels Porterhouse. The Filet Mignon & Shrimp is outstanding. The shrimp are sautéed and are served with a Riesling-garlic butter.

Now we come to my favorite part of the menu – the Italian section! The chickens are free-range and your menu choices are:



Chicken Piccata – a breast sautéed with capers, lemon, white wine accompanied by delicious roasted potatoes.

Chicken Marsala – a breast sautéed in a Marsala wine sauce with mushrooms and onions over garlic mashed potatoes.

Now here is very good news if you love veal as much as I do. This restaurant is one of very few in this area offering veal.

The current menu includes Veal Parmesan. A splendid veal cutlet topped with mozzarella and served over tortelloni pasta.

Now I will let you in on a little secret: Chef Roussel is only too happy to make off-menu dishes for you. So you can order Veal Piccata or Veal Marsala if you are so inclined. Likewise the chicken can be ordered as a Chicken Parmesan as well!

After an excellent dinner a scrumptious dessert is called for. On a recent visit my tasting team was presented with a sensational dessert tray by our knowledgeable, friendly and talented server Amanda Saeger.



The tray included Lemon with Mixed Berry Cake, Vanilla Bean Crème Brûlée, French Silk Ice Cream and Tiramisu. (Here's another Fun Fact: Tiramisu is Italian for "pick me up" or "cheer me up". When you have this coffee flavored ladyfinger dessert you just can't help feeling really good!)

Fried Green Tomatoes is a first rate restaurant for oenophiles, too. The wine list is extensive and award winning. I noted some exceptional wines on the list like Santa Margherita Pinot Grigio, Querceto Chianti Classico and a Renato Ratti Barolo. Fred introduced me to Francis Ford Coppola's Vendetta. It's a smooth cabernet and malbec blend and it is now one of my new favorites.

You will have a great time at Fried Green Tomatoes in Galena. Almost everybody does: that's why it has been a Trip Advisor Certificate of Excellence Hall of Fame winner for the last 5 years; the recipient of Open Table Diner's Choice Award for several years and the holder of a Wine Spectator's Award of Excellence for all the years 2003 through 2015 so far.

Fried Green Tomatoes has three large dining rooms and several small private rooms for parties. It is not unusual to have as many as 5 private parties going on at once. And when you go don't forget to try the Fried Green Tomatoes!

FRIED GREEN TOMATOES

213 N. Main Street, Galena, IL 61036

815-777-3938 • FriedGreen.com

Hours: Sun: 4:30 PM–Close; Mon: Closed; Tue–Fri: 4:30 PM–Close; Sat: Lunch: 12 PM–3 PM; Dinner: 3 PM–Close

Dining Style: Casual

Noise Level: Comfortable

Recommendations: Fried Green Tomatoes, Steak Martini, Beef Carpaccio, Lasagna, Spaghetti and Meatballs, Sea Scallops, Cedar Planked Walleye, Filet Mignon & Shrimp, Bone-In Ribeye, Chicken Piccata, Veal Parmesan, Chicken Marsala

Liquor Service: Full Bar, Award Winning Wine List

Prices: \$17.00–\$35.00

Pay Options: Cash, Check, Debit, All Major Credit Cards

Accessibility: Front Door & Restrooms

Kids Policy: Adult Restaurant. No menu & no high chairs or boosters

Reservations: Recommended

Catering: Yes – on and off premises

Take Out: Yes • **Delivery:** Yes • **Parking:** On Street