



Wisconsin Restaurants Dish Up National Attention

by Mary Lou Santovec

Contemporary visual artist Andy Warhol once quipped, “In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.” Although Warhol was being snarky, many Wisconsin restaurateurs are having their own encounter with national media thanks to the popularity of cable channels like the Food Network.

Sandra Lee shot an episode of her Food Network show at Rudy’s Drive-In in La Crosse. Fans of the Food Network have seen Milwaukee’s Comet Café on an episode of *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives*. Andrew Zimmern of *Bizarre Foods* on the Travel Channel touted the quality of the Polish specialties served at Polonez in Milwaukee. Sandy and Angela D’Amato of Downtown Milwaukee’s Sanford Restaurant and the Coquette Café have turned up on various national shows. Even Sprecher Brewing Co. has appeared both in print and on television for its non-alcoholic beverages.

Producers often use the Wisconsin Restaurant Association as a starting point for queries. “I’ve been getting more and more calls from production companies for national television shows,” said Tracy Kosbau, director of marketing and public relations for WRA. “I’ve even gotten calls from reality shows like *The Bachelor* who wanted me to identify a bachelor restaurateur from Wisconsin.” (No, she couldn’t assist with that one.) According to Kosbau, “sometimes they are looking for something very quirky

and specific. For example, *QSR Magazine* contacted me looking for a fast casual restaurant in Wisconsin who served a dessert containing blue cheese. Or a while back the Food Network was looking for a restaurant with a local specialty that could be shipped.”

How did the producers find these places? What is it like to be featured in the national media? Is there a correlation between appearing on television and increased business? Let’s let the operators tell their stories.

Having attended college at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Sandra Lee was familiar with the city’s annual German celebration. “She ate at Rudy’s when she was in college and had fond memories of eating corn dogs here,” said Gary Rudy, owner of the La Crosse institution. Lee returned to do four shows including one at Rudy’s Drive-In during the city’s Oktoberfest in 2007.

Her producers had paid an earlier visit to Rudy’s, checking out the drive-in and looking for unique menu items. The vegetarian walnut burgers, buffalo burgers and the Flavor-Burst ice cream seemed to seal the deal in the producers’ minds along with

Lee’s connection to the area.

The owners of the Comet Café found themselves in an episode of *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives* (that also featured Milwaukee restaurant Cempazuchi) after a customer brought the casual, neighborhood restaurant and bar to the show’s attention. “The restaurant’s co-owners underwent six hours of phone interviews before being selected to be part of an episode,” said Valeri Lucks, who along with her brother,



Andrew Zimmern, host of Travel Channel’s *Bizarre Foods* toured Milwaukee eateries with Sandy and Angie D’Amato



Adam, owns the East Side Milwaukee café. “They did a lot of vetting.”

Producers questioned how the restaurant was run, the amount of owner involvement, whether the food was made from scratch and if the restaurant offered something unique.

The D’Amatos are no strangers to the national media. Sandy was one of the chefs invited to celebrate the 80th birthday of famed French cuisine chef, Julia Child, which was filmed for PBS. “Julia had been in our restaurant a year before her 80th birthday,” he said. “She told producers that she wanted ‘that Andy boy from Milwaukee’ to participate in the show.”

D’Amato and his restaurant, Sanford, have been featured in *Bon Appetit*, *Food*

and *Wine* and *Esquire* magazines to name a few. Television appearances have included *Dining Around*, *America’s Rising Star Chefs* and *Great Chefs*, *Great Cities*.

D’Amato’s media appearances don’t always involve his restaurants. Recently, he helped connect Wladyslaw “George” and Aleksandra Burzynski, the owners of Polonez, with Andrew Zimmern, the host of *Bizarre Foods*. “Sandy knows our restaurant and he’s come here to eat,” said Aleksandra. “He recommended Andrew to our restaurant.”

Zimmern, who had visited Sanford years earlier had his producer call and

ask Sandy and Angie to escort him around on camera to various Milwaukee restaurants including Polonez. The menu for Zimmern’s visit? Czarnina (duck blood soup), pierogies and hunter stew. “Andrew is ready to eat anything in the world,” added Aleksandra, “and he’s so excited about it.”

The website for Ardy & Ed’s Drive-In caught the attention of several producers, said owner Steve Davis. “The Internet has become the go-to resource for the companies that look for unique restaurants.”

The Oshkosh landmark was featured

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in a 2004 Food Network show, *The Top 5 Food Innovations*. While several of the innovations were equipment related—think microwave—the number one innovation was fast food and the change it's had on everyone's life. "They did a history on fast food and our restaurant was part of that segment," said Davis. Ardy & Ed's also appeared in a 2005 episode of *Roker on the Road* featuring TV weather personality, Al Roker.

In 2008, the restaurant appeared in a *Roadside Drive-ins* calendar for Roadway Transportation. And Ardy & Ed's went international when Taglichtmedia of Germany included the restaurant in an episode of their documentary *As the World Eats*.

Sometimes an appearance can have nothing to do with your product. Sprecher Brewing Co. made the pages of *Entrepreneur* magazine after it won an office makeover sponsored by the *Today* show, HON Company and Xerox in 2005.

"I was watching the *Today* show one



morning before work and heard the announcement for the contest," said Anne Sprecher. "It was a fortuitous 'aha' moment."

Believing that the brewery met the key criteria (length of time in business, being a good community partner and having outdated technology), Sprecher completed the application form. The company competed against 150 other small businesses from across the country and won a total office makeover that included new computers, monitors and printers. Both the initial announcement of the winner and the unveiling were showcased on the *Today* show.

Sprecher products were also showcased on *Road Tasted Wisconsin!* with the Deen Brothers in 2006; *How'd That Get on My Plate?* in 2008; CBS *Sunday Morning* in 2009 and another *Today* show appearance also in 2009. All of the appearances highlighted the company's sodas.

With the exception of the office makeover contest, most of the operators' appearances could be chalked up to pure luck. But the old maxim about chance favoring the prepared mind is actually at work here.

"You're more likely to be on the Food Network doing the best hamburger in Milwaukee rather than something that they've never seen before," said D'Amato. "You don't have to be unusual; you just have to be good. If you have a reputation, they will find you."

Once you get over the shock of being selected, it's time to come down to earth and start asking questions. "Find out as much as you can ahead of time about the logistics of the shoot and what they are looking for. However, be careful not to throw up barriers. You don't want to scare them away" said Kosbau. While you don't have control over what they do, keep in



Behind the scenes at Rudy's Drive-In during the Food Network shoot

mind that you can try to manage the situation to your benefit.

The more helpful you can be without pestering the producers, cast and crew, the better. "They were more interested in working with me when I said I was interested in working with them," said Davis of Ardy & Ed's.

Filming an episode for a television show is extremely time-consuming. A 15-minute segment can take many hours before the director yells "It's a wrap." Producers filmed a total of 36 hours over two days for the Comet Café's eight-minute appearance on *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives*.

Accommodating the filming is disruptive to a business. There are extra staffing costs and the process can be inconvenient for customers (although they're usually forgiving because they enjoy seeing their favorite celebrity chefs and hosts). Both Rudy and Davis had to locate customers with old cars for added "color" for their segments.

Then there's the cost of unsold food. Food must be "styled" or made to look good on television. "We had to make dishes over and over again," said Lucks of the Comet Café. "I think I delivered a

Sprecher Brewing Company's office makeover was covered on national television and in *Entrepreneur* magazine





piece of pie to a table 10 times.” The food can’t be sold to customers after it’s served.

Stage fright can be an issue, but D’Amato noted that producers were very helpful, giving him directions to let him know what they wanted. “The trick is to make it fairly cohesive in a short sound bite,” he said. “You want to tell the whole story without having to ramble on and you want to be concise without being short.”

Is there an impact on the business once the initial episode airs? What about during reruns? “We noticed an increase in the business with people calling from Arizona, Florida and all over,” said Aleksandra Burzynski of Polonez. “We got e-mails asking if we would ship the czarnina.” The restaurant also noticed an influx of Chicago visitors who wanted to try the Polish specialties.

Although producers warned Comet Café’s owners to be prepared for a substantial increase in business when the segment aired, the impact still took them a little bit by surprise. “Our sales went up over the following months and haven’t returned to the norm,” said Lucks. “Instead of capitalizing on it, we’ve spent a lot of time adjusting to it.”

Adjustments have included hiring additional staff and hostesses as well as changing the way the restaurant preps its food. “It’s nice to be recognized, but we’re still a neighborhood place,” she admitted.

Rudy acknowledged that the notoriety definitely enhanced his business and that the experience was a good one. “It makes you proud that you’re doing something right,” he said. The drive-in also

saw an uptick in business after appearing in a *Minneapolis Star Tribune* ad for a wooden boat centennial. “People were calling the paper asking where Rudy’s was,” he said. “Sometimes it happens by chance; other times it’s because you’re involved with the Chamber of Commerce or the tourism bureau.”

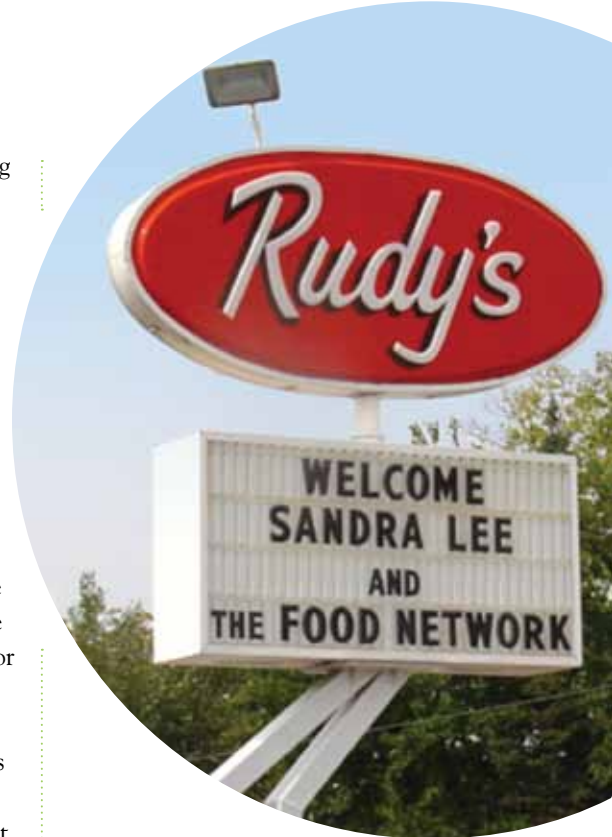
If you get national coverage, why not make the most of it? Davis of Ardy & Ed’s sent an electronic newsletter to his customers when the original episode aired and sends out a notice whenever it airs as a rerun. Others have listed the experience on their websites or added a mention to their menus.

To increase the odds of having a producer find you, Davis of Ardy & Ed’s recommended having a good website. “It communicates who you are and what you do,” he said. “Television is a visual thing. The way the website looks and the way we keep it up represents us.”

Kosbau concurred, saying, “The first place production companies will go to find a possible restaurant location is the Internet.”

Sprecher warned restaurateurs to beware of “producers” who want you to pay them for the privilege of putting your restaurant on television. She received a call from a Florida company claiming it produced travel shows and touted having Hugh Downs as a host. The company wanted Sprecher to pay upwards of \$15,000 to be on the show that didn’t have a specific time slot that it would air. She discovered that Hugh Downs hadn’t been a host on the show for several years and his sole appearance was limited to two weeks. “Don’t get sucked in,” she cautioned. “There are too many legitimate shows that will do it for free.”

Those who’ve been featured encourage others to capitalize on the notoriety by welcoming the new faces brought in by the national attention with the same enthusiasm as your regulars. “Some New York restaurants focus on



Rudy’s Drive-In was thrilled to welcome Sandra Lee and her crew from the Food Network

the regulars,” said D’Amato, “and don’t care about the newcomers. At Sanford everyone is treated as a regular. If you never forget that, you’ll have a successful place.”

“Customers get the same treatment here as Sandra Lee [did],” said Rudy.

Door County Restaurant Featured on *Good Morning America*

Door County’s The White Gull Inn was recently announced as the winner of *Good Morning America*’s Best Breakfast Challenge. *Good Morning America Weekend Edition* asked their viewers to submit 300-word essays extolling the virtues of their favorite restaurant breakfast. The White Gull Inn’s cherry-stuffed French toast was declared the best breakfast through public online voting combined with input from the show’s hosts. **WR**

