

FISH FRY

Prices hard to swallow

said she appreciates that the dining hall takes reservations and has tasty food. But she was disappointed to hear that the price had jumped to \$14.95.

"That's a little bit steep," she said. "I don't know if I'd want to go back too often at that price."

At another popular location, VFW Post 8834 in Hartford, officials plan to switch from Icelandic cod to haddock, a more affordable variety of fish.

Customers at the VFW post will find higher prices starting Aug. 1 — about 50 cents more for most fish dinners — but the popular "beer-batter special" will remain \$6.50, featuring haddock rather than cod.

Laurie Giencke, the VFW's hall manager, said she was unsure whether

customers would notice the change in fish. But she knows exactly what to expect when the price increases take effect.

"Everybody is going to notice," she said, "because everybody is watching their nickels and dimes."

Restaurateurs point to a variety of economic forces at work — including rising gasoline costs and increased global demand for goods — that have made many consumer products more costly.

Even the price of frying oil has jumped. Lauri Tomasek, owner of the Yardarm Bar & Grill in Racine, now pays \$28 for a standard 35-pound container that used to cost \$17.

Tomasek said she has been considering a fish fry price increase for several weeks, but she has resisted. Menu options currently start at \$9 for a catfish dinner.

"We just don't want to do it, because everybody's paying so much for everything," she said.

Global Influences

Fish fry operators and wholesalers blame the increased cost of Icelandic cod on the depressed value of the dollar compared with foreign currencies, especially



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Fried pollack is served at Serb Hall in Milwaukee on June 13. Serb Hall has had to raise prices on a standard fish fry by nearly 60%.

in Europe.

Steve Meier, a longtime Brookfield-based marketer of products for Icelandic USA Inc., a major seafood supplier, said cod prices that typically inch up 5 cents at a time in the United States have jumped 25 to 30 cents on four different occasions

in recent months.

Meier said the price increases are due to a U.S. supply shortage, because international suppliers are focused on serving customers elsewhere.

"I can't blame an Icelandic," he said. "It's an artificial inflation."

Noting that the Milwaukee area remains a major consumer of Icelandic cod, Meier said restaurants should either raise their prices or switch to a more affordable fish.

Some reluctance

But in an area where Friday fish fry is a time-honored tradition at countless restaurants, dining halls and taverns — all vying for coveted "best fish fry" honors — many business people are reluctant to tinker with their established formula.

Dan Schwefel, owner of Schwefel's Restaurant in Oconomowoc, said he overhauled his menu this spring with many price increases, including a \$1 increase that would have made his fish fry \$11.95. At the last moment, he called the printer and ordered the fish fry price to remain unchanged at \$10.95.

Schwefel said he could not bear the thought of alienating customers. But he also has suffered ongoing cost increases ever since.

"We're sympathetic to the customer," he said. "How long can we do it? Boy, it doesn't look good."

Some predicted that hesitant fish fry purveyors will go ahead with price increases now that it has happened

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Dan Schwefel,
owner of Schwefel's Restaurant, on
delaying price increases

at Serb Hall, which has been distinguished many times over the years as having one of Milwaukee's best fish fries.

"I give them credit for being gutsy," said Larry Meyer, owner of Meyer's Restaurant & Bar in Greenfield. Meyer said he is still wrestling with whether to raise his \$9.95 price or switch to haddock.

Ron Eder, owner of Ron's Cozy Corner in Oconomowoc, has just about made up his mind: By the end of the month, customers will likely pay more for the Cozy Corner's beer-battered cod, which now goes for \$7.95 a plate.

Eder, who said he has been enduring cost increases for months, noted that that other fish fry operators in the area charge \$12 or more.

"It's getting pretty costly," he said. "We're probably going to get in line with everybody else."