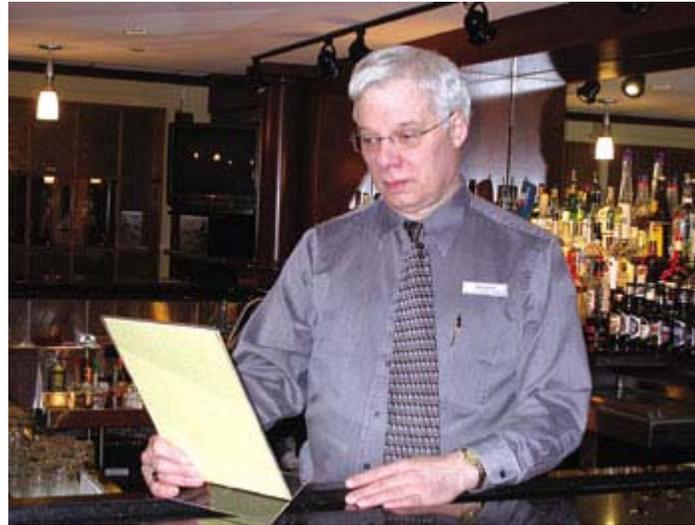




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*Danielle Williamson
 photo*

Paul Galipeau, purchasing manager for the Southbridge Hotel & Conference Center, shows off the bar at Shades Lounge, where patrons may now order food on Fridays and Saturdays.



Food returns to DOD

Schedule at former AO is limited for now

*BY DANIELLE WILLIAMSON
 NEWS STAFF WRITER*

SOUTHBRIDGE — The Southbridge Hotel & Conference Center's Shades Lounge, which reopened last year after being closed for two months, has brought back its menu.

"There is a lot of misconception out there over what we have available," said Kimberly Cameron, general manager of the hotel and conference center. "We need people to realize that we're open, and to start coming back."

Shades Lounge started serving food again last month. The lounge is open 5 p.m. to midnight Fridays and Saturdays; the kitchen closes at 10 p.m.

Boston-based Franklin Realty Associates runs the hotel and conference center for Southbridge Associates LLC, a real estate arm of the former American Optical.

The Southbridge Hotel & Conference Center, located at the business center on Optical Drive, opened in 2001, and became available to the public in January 2002. The \$84 million, 315,000-square-foot, world-class conference facility has 201 hotel rooms.

The facility was designed with the understanding that its primary tenant, the Department of Defense (DOD), would execute a food service contract and utilize food services at a specific minimum monthly level. But as a result of the cancellation of the Defense Leadership and Management Program training in December 2001 and the inability to find a replacement agency, the DOD did not enter into a new food service agreement.

The kitchen, dining, and bar areas closed in December 2003. Hotel and conference center officials said the federal government's unwillingness to enter into a \$2.5 million annual food service agreement and its inability to fully utilize the facility resulted in "unsustainable financial losses." Charles F. Norton, of Franklin Realty, has said that revenues from food service operations offered to DOD attendees were less than \$250,000 annually, as opposed to the expected \$2.5 million.

While Norton said that business from the town surpassed original expectations, it was not sufficient to cover the food service operating costs, as the DOD students did not use the facility as much as expected. Last February, hotel and conference center officials reopened the bar at Shades Lounge. Until last month, food was not served there.

"We really weren't ready to offer food at that point," said Paul Galipeau, the hotel and conference center's purchasing manager.

Many of Shades' customers before the lounge closed in late 2003 enjoyed the food there, Galipeau said. This is what led to the decision to bring back a menu.

The current menu includes 10 items, ranging from buffalo chicken wings to nachos, Caesar salads to burgers and quesadillas. Executive Chef John Gaughan, who has worked for the hotel and conference center since it opened, said there are about six fewer items on the menu than there were before Shades closed.

"We listened to what the customers said and brought back food," Cameron said.

Galipeau said the hotel hopes to offer entertainment on weekends. In the past, musicians have played in the lounge.

Neither Galipeau nor Cameron could speculate as to whether the Visions Restaurant, too, would reopen. They did not dismiss the idea of the lounge extending its hours or days of operation, depending on the lounge's popularity.

"We're going to see how it goes," Galipeau said.

Danielle Williamson may be reached at (508) 909-4133, or by e-mail at dwilliamson@stonebridgepress.com.