

## Home field advantage

Heather Rule  
hrule@postbulletin.com

Baseball isn't a year-round sport in Minnesota, but with the new baseball-themed restaurant Home Plate now open in Austin, the spirit of the game can stay alive.

Home Plate opened Dec. 1 in the former Tolly's Time Out. It's planning a grand opening for later this month. The restaurant is split into two baseball-related sections, Minnesota Twins and Austin, and is complete with red, white and blue painted walls and oodles of baseball memorabilia.

"Baseball's always been around, but I didn't realize that Austin was just heavy in the baseball community," said Julie Johnson, owner of Home Plate.

Not to worry if you're not a baseball fan, because Home Plate offers a casual dining experience and serves up everything from sandwiches to hearty breakfast foods to homemade pies.

"That's the play on words because home plate also goes for home-cooked meals," Johnson said. "We've got American, family food, so baseball goes hand in hand with that."

### Menu specialties

The pork tenderloin sandwich is the old standby, Johnson said. A couple of other favorites are a walleye fillet sandwich and a steak sandwich, which is a rib eye steak on a hoagie bun.

One of the more unique items on the baseball-themed menu is something called the Knuckler. This sandwich is a cheeseburger with bacon, egg and a thin layer of peanut butter.

The Knuckler's ingredients have been met with a lot of raised eyebrows and curled up noses, Johnson said, but after customers try a sample, they end up ordering it.

"I know it sounds strange, but it's very good," Johnson said.

Customer service is also important to the Home Plate staff, who wear baseball-jersey T-shirts. Johnson said that if the wait staff needs to take a meal out of the kitchen and it looks like something they wouldn't eat themselves, they are not supposed to serve it.

"The customer will always come first," Johnson said. "We'd rather have our customers wait and have it done right than serve them a bad meal."

### 'At the ballpark'

Quite possibly the most eye-catching element of the interior decor is a wall near the kitchen that is covered ceiling to floor with a 9 1/2-foot by 16-foot photo of Target Field. The scene is a view of the field during a Twins vs. the Chicago White Sox game from the ballpark's inaugural season in 2010.

It's such a popular part of the restaurant that diners have had their photos taken standing "at the ballpark."

A couple of game-used bats, from Twins player Michael Cuddyer and now-former Twin Delmon Young, are

also displayed at Home Plate. The bats are "complete with pine tar," so they're also a bit sticky. Fathers have held up their sons just so they can touch the bats, Johnson said.

Some of the other memorabilia includes baseball gloves and trophies from the 1930s and 1940s. Anyone who has a baseball-related item they'd like to have displayed at Home Plate is encouraged to bring it in, Johnson said.

So from the American food to America's past time, Home Plate has got its bases covered.

"At least try us once, and I can guarantee that they will come back," Johnson said.

"The food is good, and they always leave full. They don't walk away hungry. And, yes, if you walk out of here hungry, we are doing something wrong."