

## An atomic test drive

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PORTAGE | Olga Velazquez took her first bite and waited.

She had signed her waiver and readied herself for the heat. When it hit the back of her throat, she smiled and let out a fake scream.

"You better get the ambulance," Velazquez said with a laugh.

The Portage mayoral hopeful, who ate the first atomic chicken wing of the new Portage Quaker Steak & Lube restaurant, was one of several residents and city and restaurant officials test-driving the menu Monday.

The chain has come a long way since starting 33 years ago in an abandoned gas station in Sharon, Pa. Another down-to-earth, steel-producing area, Northwest Indiana is much like the restaurant's first home, Portage franchise owner Larry Briski said.

From steelworkers to children, "This is a place for everybody," he said. "This is a region restaurant."

It's the first of its kind in Indiana, and Briski called Portage's growing retail and proximity to Bass Pro Shops the perfect combination.

For Bob Guy, the Portage site is the sixth of the chain he has visited. Guy, of Valparaiso, used to frequent the Sharon restaurant 20 years ago when traveling for work.

"It's great," he said. "It's the best wings in the states."

The 10,000-square-foot, 405-seat restaurant has three bars. One is the Brickyard Bar, which is outside with patio seating.

Below ceilings where cars and motorcycles hang suspended, the restaurant offers several televisions for customers who might want to watch something other than NASCAR. Entrance to the novelty restaurant comes after pulling on a gasoline-pump door handle.

But it all comes back to the sauce, restaurant officials said, which has won national awards for some of its 19 flavors.

Not all employees at the new Portage location have tried the atomic wings, but Michele Devlin, of Hobart, was brave enough. She admits to not faring as well as Velasquez.

"I cried for, like, 20 minutes," Devlin said.

### OFFICIAL OPENING

When: 3 p.m. Wednesday

Where: 6245 Ameriplex Drive, Portage

### WHAT'S COOKING?

There are several menu items, including steak, sandwiches, appetizers and desserts. But the star of the show is the selection of chicken wings. The restaurant has rated the hottest -- the atomic -- "insane." It would take 150,000 units of water to lose all traces of heat in an atomic wing. It takes about 5,000 for one unit of jalapeno. Customers must sign a release form to eat atomic wings.



TONY V. MARTIN | THE TIMES Actual stock cars form part of the landscape outside the Quaker Steak & Lube restaurant Monday during the Portage restaurant's opening party. The restaurant distinguishes itself with its motor sport-themed dining rooms, signature varieties of wings and 19 flavors of national award-winning sauce.