

Fine food a recipe for success

By Melissa Keogh

From the last minute rush of the 'six o'clock swill' to the days of horse-drawn wheat wagons parked out the front, Strathalbyn's Victoria Hotel has seen it all.

Now the staff at the 150-year-old pub can boast its long-standing popularity with good reason after being named the best bistro and casual dining venue in country SA.

The Australian Hotels Association (AHA) SA Hotel Industry award is now one of two proudly hanging on the wall.

The first title was won in 2003. Owners Doug and Kate Walters have been at the helm of the pub for the past 15 years and are the most loyal occupiers in all its history.

Mr Walters said the hotel's shortest serving owner gave up after just one week in 1975.

Like many old country pubs, the Victoria Hotel, also once a boarding lodge, has experienced a series of unexplained events, something the Walters put down to a bit of paranormal activity.

Died of typhoid

When a picture frame fell off its hinges and smashed on the floor one night on Halloween and, on a separate occasion, a girl was seen "walking around in old clothes" they knew something spooky was going on.

"There was a young girl Mary who died of typhoid in one of the upstairs rooms in the 1800s," Mr Walters said.

"Strange things do happen from time to time, and when it does I just tell Mary to settle down."

However, Mr Walters said the supernatural occurrences failed to ward



ABOVE: The Victoria Hotel in 1915.

Victoria Hotel manager Paul Coombe, left, and owners Doug and Kate Walters say the 150-year-old pub still has a winning charm after being named the best bistro and casual dining venue in country SA.

off the 1000 loyal locals and visitors who dine at the hotel every week.

"Believe it or not the lambs fry is the most popular meal, particularly with the older people who will travel from far and wide for it," he said.

Mrs Walters said the SA Hotel Industry award was a "total team effort" and thanked manager Paul Coombe for his efforts.

"It's about excellent service and food, so consistency is the key," she said.

"It's very important to us that we retain the good country feel and heritage in the upkeep of the hotel." The Victoria Hotel has undergone a number of renovations, most recently a refit of the front bar, with artwork, lighting and chairs.

AHA SA general manager Ian Horne described the Victoria Hotel as a

"brilliantly run operation" that earned the crown due to its large menu, atmosphere and customer service.

"The atmosphere is warm and cozy and the customer service is amazing," he said.

"Their dedication to training is evident from the moment you walk in the door."

All AHA SA Hotel Industry winners will compete at the national awards, announced in Brisbane in September.

'Massive achievement' to be named best hotel in SA



Locals gather near The Stirling Hotel during the town's parade in 1916-17.

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"It showcases the best of the best," he said.

"Our menu is continually changing to adhere to not just the seasons, but the availability of fresh, local produce."

AHAI SA general manager Ian Horne said The Stirling Hotel proved it was "well ahead of the game" with its presentation, food quality, beverage choices and customer service.

"(It's) an outstanding and very popular venue with a very high standard across all of its major facets," he said.

"It is a clear stand-out and very worthy of this

important recognition."

The Stirling Hotel's history dates back to 1859, shortly after the founding of the township.

It was named the Halfway House Hotel due to its central location between Adelaide and Mt Barker.

Since then it has been at the hands of many different owners and withstood a number of facelifts.

In 2013 a pizza and lounge bar was added to the bistro and late last year the outdoor area was expanded to incorporate a large dining deck overlooking Mt Barker Road.