Eat, drink & be retro

by Gillian - Wednesday, September 23, 2015

http://3storymagazine.com/tucson-50s-and-60s-restaurants/

In Tucson, there are plenty of food and drink establishments that remain relatively unchanged since the 50's and 60's. Let 3 Story and Tucson Foodie be your guides. By Adam Lehrman and Gillian Drummond.

Photo by Kevin Breutzmann

As Tucsonans and many out-of-towners gather for the third annual Tucson Modernism Week, we thought it was high time we directed all of you to mid-century places to eat and imbibe. And we don't mean '50s and '60s style eateries and bars, with their try-too-hard checkerboard patterns and uber accessorizing. We're talking the real deal: places that have remained relatively unchanged since the middle of last century. The neon signs. The retro fixtures. The kitsch and ephemera. The atmosphere. And, most of all, the reputation for good food and cocktails. All of these things keep people coming back.
As asked what makes a restaurant still popular close to six decades on, Michael Elefante, co-owner of Mama Louisa's on South Craycroft, says simply: "Consistency." Mama Louisa's still gets visits from its original customers, some of whom are turning 90. Having one foot in the past and another in the future is a conundrum, though. Michael's family has owned the restaurant since 1973, and Michael recently became joint owner along with his brother Joey and friend Michael Press. (Until recently the two Michaels worked together as chefs at the Ritz Carlton Dove Mountain.) They have plans for a new menu (fresh mozzarella and Margarita pizza are on their way) and they're gently tweaking the interior. But Michael Elefante knows he can't change things up too much. "I call her a fisherman," he says of the restaurant he grew up in, washing dishes at the age of eight. "She reels us in. You start going too far out and she reels us in and reminds us of where we are." Here, in no particular order, are the ones that reel us customers in:

1. Mama Louisa's, 2041 S. Craycroft Rd

Photo by Gillian Drummond
The style: Your baritone-voiced, chain-smoking Italian grandmother's restaurant (although she quit smoking years ago.) It's checked tablecloths, hand painted mural walls of Italy's shore, formica, and vinyl.

Michael Press, left, and Michael Elefante, the new chef-owners of Mama Louisa's. Photo by Gillian Drummond

The story: Opened in 1956 on south Craycroft when it was still a young dirt road, Mama Louisa's has been in the Elefante family since 1973. In August it came under the joint ownership of brothers Joey and Michael Elefante and friend Michael Press. All of the murals on the walls are the original paintings from artist Jose de la Flora, save for one added in the 1970s by artist Paul Sheldon. All pasta is made fresh daily. Expect new dishes and decor tweaks soon. Don't miss: Joe's Special. Hands down. Whatever you end up with at Mama Louisa's, make sure it includes Joe's Special - linguine with hot pepper seeds, garlic and sauce - in some way, shape, or form.

2. The Shelter, 4155 E. Grant Rd

Photo by Kevin Breutzmann
The style: Cold-war era 1960s retro lounge. Think Austin Powers meets Hanna Barbera. Kitsch-filled from floor to ceiling with expertly curated Elvis and JFK memorabilia, lava lamps, velvet, and lavish lighting. If you're lucky, the original Flash Gordon will be playing on the tele. The story: Though the rumors abound regarding The Shelter's history as a 60's era fallout shelter, the joint was originally built in 1961 by one of Arizona's first female architects, Ruby Wren. Interesting enough, Wren's grandson will open a brewery in downtown Tucson named Pueblo Vida. Don't miss: Martini, White Russian, or Bloody Mary. Ideally, not in a row.

3. Mi Nidito, 1813 S 4th Ave
The style: Vivid. Very. There's no subtlety here. It's shameless south-of-the-border kitsch with no prizes for sleek MCM-ness. But talk to any of the patrons and they'll tell you they come not for decor, but great Mexican food. The lines are out the door at peak times, when you can expect a wait of an hour or even two. The story: Ernesto and Alicia Lopez opened the restaurant in 1952 and named it Mi Nidito ("my little nest") because of its small size. Additions and remodels have increased the number of tables since (it's hard to think that what serves as a waiting area now was once the kitchen), but the atmosphere remains the same. Ownership has passed on to the Lopezes' son Ernesto, his wife Yolanda and their son Jimmy Lopez.
Don't miss: The most popular dishes are the President's Plate (the spread Bill Clinton had when he came here in '99), Birria (shredded beef) and Carne Seca. The latter is made with beef that's hung to dry for four-and-a-half days, then deep fried, boiled and finally mixed with green peppers, crushed tomatoes, cilantro and green onions. We say anything that's labored over that much is worth it.

4. Lucky Wishbone, 4701 E. Broadway Blvd 85711

Photo by fotovitamina
The style: (Was) 1950s drive-in restaurant-meets-diner, sans the drive-in. Sadly, the historic, iconic neon starburst sign is the only remnant of the original location. The sign was almost lost during the recent rebuild.

Lucky Wishbone's Campbell location in 1956. Photo courtesy of Mark Morris.

The story: Opened in 1953 by Derald Fulton as an "easier-to-run" eatery, the original Lucky Wishbone opened at 4872 South Sixth at Irvington. Immediate success lent itself to opening more locations - including the one on Broadway in 1954. Clyde Buzzard was made its managing partner. To this day, he still manages the restaurant and is the only surviving partner. Don't miss: It's hard to go wrong with anything at this fried-everything utopia. Standouts include Gizzards or Livers, Steak Fingers, Fried Chicken, and the Double Cheeseburger on Garlic Toast.

5. Kon Tiki, 4625 E. Broadway

Photo courtesy of Kon Tiki
The style: ’60s tiki/exotica. The bamboo, the masks, the flaming torches at the door: it's all unchanged since this place opened in 1963 and is a tikiphile's dream.

Photo courtesy of Kon Tiki

The story: Dean Short opened it in 1963 after being inspired by tiki bars on a visit to California. It changed hands twice more, and current owner Paul Christopher practically cut his teeth on tiki. He started working there as a dishwasher and busboy at 15 and worked his way up. The place has served the likes of Lee Marvin, Robert Wagner and Robert Mitchum.

Don't miss: There's an extensive food menu, and the Polynesian BBQ Ribs are a favorite. But let's be honest: people come for the pack-a-punch cocktails. The Scorpion Bowl for two ($14), is a big, boozy, secret blend of rums, gin, brandy and liqueurs, ingested through long straws.

6. Pat's Drive-In, 1202 W. Niagara Street
The style: Vintage roadside Americana. From the neon sign to the simple functionality to the barber-shop-style red and white stripes of tile out front, it's humbly authentic - unlike so many modern places these days that are decked out to look like a '50s diner. The story: Henry 'Pat' Patterson launched his chili-dogs-and-fries concept in the 1950s, expanded, then downsized. This last remaining Pat's, just south of Speedway Blvd, has been around since 1962. In 1969, long-time employee Charlie Hernandez took over the business but kept Pat's name. Charlie carried on Pat's tradition of simple, inexpensive food: burgers, chili dogs, chicken, shrimp and fish. Don't miss: It's known for its chili dogs (choose the spicy version for an extra kick). Just before Pat passed away in 1999, he's said to have turned to his wife and asked for a chili dog from Pat's. But even the staff prefer the Big Pat burger. Also try the shoe-string fries, hand-cut. Just remember to bring cash, because they charge extra for debit cards, and don't accept credit.

And lastly...

Chaffin's Diner, 902 E. Broadway Blvd.
There was debate among 3 Story staff and contributors about whether or not to include Chaffin's in this article. Some refuse to patronize the place because of stories surrounding its owner. Others just don't think the food in this greasy spoon is even worth a mention. But, politics and iffy dishes aside, the place scores high for its looks. This is a real deal American diner, born in 1964.

* Tucson Modernism Week takes place October 2-10 in venues around Tucson. For tickets and a schedule, visit tucsonmod.com or pick up this free Tucson Modernism Week Collector's Guide, at locations in and around Tucson.