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I Miss Poppa Gar's

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More than any city I've ever lived in, Las Vegas keeps its eyes on the future, often at the expense of the past. As a result, many old-time establishments fall by the wayside without fanfare. A few have managed to hang on despite the odds. I try to visit the vintage restaurants on a regular basis, not only because the food and service are so good, but to make sure they're still around.

[ENTRY]

I miss Poppa Gar's.

For a long time, Poppa Gar's was the coolest, most down-to-earth breakfast and lunch joint in Las Vegas. (PETA alert: Stop reading here.) Owned by outdoorsman Garland Minor, the restaurant featured an exotic collection of wild game on both the walls and the menu. Nowhere else in town could you get a breakfast of quail and eggs, and it was probably bagged by Poppa himself. Las Vegas movers and shakers flocked to the place, on West Oakey, and made it their own. On any given day you'd see politicians, lobbyists, casino execs, headliners, admen and wiseguys huddled under moose heads plotting their next high-powered moves. Since Poppa's death a number of years back (he lived well into his 90s), the restaurant has changed hands and identities many times. None has captured that original vibe.

I also miss the Country Inn, Manfredi's Limelight, Foxy's, the Prime Rib, the Brewery, Carlos Murphy's and the Green Shack. Especially the Green Shack. Built in 1929 to service the workers building Hoover Dam, the Green Shack was a Las Vegas fixture for decades. It served up the best fried chicken in town, prepared in cast-iron skillets like my Aunt Betty's, not drowned in deep vats of fat like the Colonel's. In 1994, the Green Shack was named to the National Register of Historic Places. So, of course, in 1999, it was demolished to make way for ... *what*, exactly? As of this writing, the former Green Shack is nothing but a vacant lot at the spot where Boulder Highway becomes Fremont Street. Every time I drive past, it makes me sad. That's because I've broken one of the cardinal rules of living in this town: Don't get too attached to anything.

When the Green Shack went down, the torch for oldest Las Vegas family restaurant got passed to **El Sombrero Café**, a modest adobe-style café on South Main Street. The back of El Sombrero's menu tells the story better than I can:

El Sombrero Café was established in 1950 by my uncle Clemente Griego. His wife, my Aunt Emily, joined him in 1954. Together, they successfully ran the place for 20 years. I, Jose Aragon, joined them in 1964 but I had to leave in May of 1966 to serve in Vietnam for two years. In 1970, I took over El Sombrero Café with the help of my sister Romona and my brother Juan. In 1984, my wife Teresa joined me and has been with me ever since. I want to thank God Almighty for granting me the opportunity to serve you, the customer, who after all are the ones who make it possible for this restaurant to be here. For this, I say thank you.

When you visit El Sombrero, you may find yourself thanking God and Jose, too. I try to drop in every couple of months, whenever I find myself downtown. On a recent Thursday afternoon, my business partner, Alex, and I stopped by for lunch. Even though he's lived here for 13 years, it was his first time. The place, with no more than six tables, six booths and an array of colorful sombreros lining the walls, was packed. No recession here, apparently. Luckily, an older couple was just leaving. Teresa (of the above-mentioned menu bio), greeted us warmly and immediately cleared a table, delivering chips and salsa in mere moments. Instantly, Alex was in salsa heaven.

"Is this homemade?" he asked.

"Yes," Teresa said. *"Todo, todo, todo."*

When Teresa left for the kitchen, I asked Alex what that meant. (He's originally from Uruguay.)

"Everything, everything, everything," he translated.

Teresa nailed it. Everything was homemade and everything was delicious. My bowl of "Chili Colorado" contained huge chunks of beef and provided a nice, slow burn. "The secret's in the New Mexico red chilies," she informed me.

Alex, just as smitten with his enchilada-and-taco combo, bought a tub of salsa to go. Before we even left the restaurant, he called his wife to make arrangements for a return visit.

Another local favorite that's somehow managed to survive the wrecking ball is the 24-hour **Tiffany's Café**, situated inside White Cross Drugs on Las Vegas Boulevard

South, in the shadow of the Stratosphere. “Breakfast at Tiffany’s” has been a Las Vegas tradition since 1953. Don’t let the name fool you. Tiffany’s isn’t fancy, just good. With a smattering of red vinyl booths and about 15 counter stools, it’s one of the last of the drugstore lunchrooms (the Huntridge on Maryland Parkway being another)—so genuine you expect it to be sepia-toned.

In the more than 20 years that I’ve been going to Tiffany’s, I’ve never had a bad meal. On our latest early-morning expedition, my wife ordered chicken-fried steak and I had the trout and eggs. My trout was pan-fried and perfect: crisp on the outside, moist and tender on the inside (I write ads for a living ... so sue me). Tammy’s steak was even better—possibly the best I’ve ever had (I stole a small piece when she wasn’t looking). I was tempted to ask Thelma, our server, who’s been there more than 20 years herself, to bring me my own steak, but that would have pushed me over the edge.

“It all starts with the meat,” says Denny Kolmetsky. Denny bought the place five years ago with his buddy Teddy Pappas; the two had been toiling there as cooks since the mid-70s. If anyone should know meat, it’s Denny, who once worked as a butcher back in New Jersey. On this particular morning, he and Teddy took turns at the grill, pumping out the meals with more dexterity than any Benihana chef. When the owners personally prepare your breakfast, that’s the ultimate in quality control.

Tiffany’s is great for lunch, too. The half-pound burger is, hands down, my favorite in all of Las Vegas, and that includes the upscale burger joints that seem to capture all the headlines. I guess I’m not the only fan; according to Denny, Tiffany’s moves about 200 burgers a week.

Business was steady and I recognized some of the regulars, many of whom are card-carrying AARP members. “We get about 90 percent locals,” Denny says. “Sometimes they bring visitors here and they become regulars whenever they’re in town. We’re also getting more and more of the younger generation, fathers bringing their kids and so on.”

Being featured in the 2007 movie “Lucky You” didn’t hurt, either.

“Be sure to mention that Robert Duvall said we have character,” Denny told me. “He should know. He’s an Oscar winner.”

Consider it done.