

# THE SACRAMENTO BEE

## Four Sacramento area classic restaurants still have plenty to offer the food scene

BY ALLEN PIERLEONI *SPECIAL TO THE BEE*

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Patti Palamidessi jokes around with customers, John and Tom Martin of Winters at The Club Pheasant, Feb. 26, 2019. The restaurant was established in 1935 West Sacramento. Palamidessi says one of the secrets to it's longevity is that they make everyone feel like family. [LEZLIE STERLING@SACBEE.COM](mailto:LEZLIE.STERLING@SACBEE.COM)

Restaurants come and restaurants go, some sooner rather than later. For instance, the Grid on K Street closed in January after only five months of serving its amalgamation of “Sacramento cuisine.” In contrast, Club Pheasant in West

Sacramento has occupied the same space for 83 years under the same family ownership.

Sacramento's ongoing restaurant renaissance hasn't slowed down since Halloween 2012, when Mayor Kevin Johnson proclaimed Sacramento as America's Farm-to-Fork Capital. Last September, more than 80,000 fans attended the daylong Farm-to-Fork Festival, lining up at more than 100 vendor booths.

Always on the hunt for the Next Big Thing, and any opportunity to post food porn on social media, the restaurant-obsessed have descended on the likes of Burger Lounge and Fizz, Camden Spit & Larder and Urban Roots, with more choices poised to open.

Largely forgotten – by some segments of diners, anyway – in the feeding frenzy are Sacramento's surviving family-run vintage restaurants. In the day, they were destinations that dominated the dining-drinking scene, and later helped define what would become Sacramento's restaurant culture.

Long gone are the Coral Reef, Capital Tamale, the Buggy Whip and the Golden Tee. Their surviving sisters are mainly supported by a loyal, multigenerational clientele of a certain age – say, 50 to 80 – and staffed with servers and cooks who have been on site for decades. Their from-scratch mainstay dishes rarely change, with roots in recipes dating from the 1930s to the 1960s.

We're talking about places like Espanol, Club Pheasant, El Novillero, Whitey's Jolly Kone, Sam's Hofbrau, Old Ironsides, Brownie's Lounge, Gunther's Ice Cream, Jim-Denny's – and Frank Fat's.

But why would a hip new audience of foodies go vintage when so many new restaurants with more complex menus crowd the spotlight, despite their higher prices, decibel levels and inconvenient parking? As always, context is everything.

- “The vintage restaurants have a strong sense of place and culture, and offer an experience with the past,” said Paula J. Johnson, curator of the Smithsonian Institution’s Food History program.

“There’s a different sensibility of comfort and connection that speaks to people in a way that new restaurants cannot,” she said. “Most people don’t want everything sparkly and of the moment. A lot of people value a sense of continuity.”

- “(Foodies) need to see what a classic really is and find the answer to the question: Why do these places have such staying power?” said food historian Maryellen Burns, co-author of “Lost Restaurants of Sacramento and Their Recipes.”

“For my generation, life’s important moments took place at the classic eating places – prom, birthdays, anniversaries,” she said. “They’re places full of family history and a lifetime of stories. They’re where the customer is the star, not the chef.”

- “We live in cities we don’t know much about, so it would behoove people to explore (vintage) places,” said historian Marcia Eymann of the Sacramento History Museum. “They represent the diversity of the community that settled here.”

- “They’re valuable for their authenticity,” said local historian William Burg, author of “Midtown Sacramento” and the upcoming “Wicked Sacramento.” “It’s the same reason why people love old buildings – not necessarily because they’re fans of the architecture, but for that sense of familiarity, even if it’s a new place to them.”

We took a culinary excursion into the past, visiting four places where the décor is retro and the restaurateurs are the caretakers of cultural gems that, once gone, will never come again.

## ESPAÑOL: 96 YEARS

Perry Luigi starts prepping lunch and dinner in the Espanol kitchen at 3 a.m., making meatballs, tasting sauces, layering lasagna.

When customers ask him for a recipe, he's glad to oblige and even offers to demonstrate how it's done – if they join him at 3 a.m. to help. “Nobody's taken me up on it yet,” he said.

The Espanol opened in 1923 as a Basque eatery specifically for the Spanish shepherders who lived in the boardinghouse rooms above it, at 11<sup>th</sup> and J streets.

It went through several ownerships and relocations, moving in 1965 to its present site on Folsom Boulevard. Frank “Babe” Luigi bought it in 1959, changed the cuisine to Italian and then sold it in 1988 to his son, Perry, who co-owns it with his sister, Paula Serrano.

“I came in to help out my dad in the early 1980s (after graduating from Sac State) and I've been here ever since,” said Luigi, 61, who once worked 100-hour weeks but is now “so low-key most people don't know who I am.”

Last October, the Espanol was honored with a Burnett Award from the Sacramento History Alliance in recognition of its longevity. Other recipients included Biba, Frank Fat's and Corti Bros. Market.

“We're not a restaurant that changes much,” Luigi said. “We stick with what we do.”

That would include pasta and eggplant parmesan, chicken cacciatore and corned beef and cabbage. Shades of boardinghouse grub.

The minestrone soup is a standing hit. “I'll go through 30 gallons each day,” Luigi said.

Espanol is best known for its family-style, multi-course lunches and dinners at reasonable prices. Served, of course, on red-checked tablecloths.

Being in a city with a vital restaurant scene, is there any pressure to modernize?

“Sometimes I think I want to compete, but we’re in our own niche and I’d rather stay there,” he said. “If we changed, we’d be just another place in the mix and not the Espanol anymore.”

IF YOU GO

**Espanol, 5723 Folsom Blvd., Sacramento**

**Info:** 916-457-1936, [www.espanol-italian.com](http://www.espanol-italian.com).

**Hours:** Lunch is 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays to Saturdays. Dinner is 4 to 9 p.m. Tuesdays to Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sundays. No lunch Sundays, dinner only

CLUB PHEASANT: 84 YEARS

Club Pheasant never was a hunt club, nor does the menu offer roast pheasant.

When George and Luisa Palamidessi bought the former Hideaway Club in 1935, they named it Golden Pheasant after the flocks of pheasants that lived in the thousands of acres of surrounding fields. But a San Francisco restaurant had that name first, so they renamed it Club Pheasant.

“We keep it going the way my grandparents, aunts and uncles did,” said dining room manager Patti Palamidessi, co-owner with brothers Peter and Paul Palamidessi. “The main thing we do is make people comfortable.”

Patti Palamidessi, 63, has been on site for 43 years, starting practically the same day as server Yvonne Zetz Torgerson, who was Miss Sacramento in 1964. The head cook, Sarina Jorge, 82, has been at the stove for 60 years.

All the dishes are homemade from fresh ingredients, many of them from “my Nona’s (grandmother Luisa’s) recipes, and my aunt’s and my mom’s and dad’s. Nona *invented* farm-to-fork, and we keep everything the way we’ve always had it.”

Old school is the rule, with Italian-style lamb stew and roast rack of pork, shrimp Louie and chicken sautéed in sherry. Where else will you find Tuscan lima beans and a “relish dish” as appetizers?

Two signatures are handmade beef-cheese-spinach ravioli, with 10,000 individual pasta pillows going out of the kitchen each week, followed by 1,000 garlic steak sandwiches.

The old-fashioned bar is decorated with ceramic and glass pheasant figurines, and functions as a social club after 5 p.m. Just about everybody who elbows in orders fried ravioli appetizers with mariana sauce dolloped with scorching mustard.

“It’s comforting to know your dish will be cooked and served the same way every time,” Palamidessi said. “Yes, you’re out to dinner, but in a way it’s like having dinner at your home.”

The secret sauce in all of this? “It doesn’t matter who walks through the door, we make them feel like they’re somebody and not just another customer.”

## IF YOU GO

Club Pheasant, 2525 Jefferson Blvd., West Sacramento

**Info:** 916-371-9530, [www.theclubpheasant.com](http://www.theclubpheasant.com).

**Hours:** Lunch is 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday. Dinner is 5 to 9 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday, and 3 to 9 p.m. Sundays.

## WHITEY'S JOLLY KONE: 56 YEARS

For 18 years running – from the Fourth of July 'til Labor Day – the sign has been posted in the walk-up order window of tiny Whitey's Jolly Kone: “Fresh peach milkshakes.”

Burgers, chili dogs and tacos may be the mainstays of the venerated drive-in, but it's the peach shake that has customers calling weeks in advance of its annual debut.

“Every year I go to the same peach stand near Lodi and deal with the same guy,” said Paula Ericson, 63, co-owner with husband Steve, 65. “We sell peach shakes as fast as we can make them.”

For a couple of months a year, the peach shake even outshines the Whitey's Special (a double bacon cheeseburger) and the Hot Chihuahua (a hot dog with cheese, salsa and onion wrapped in a tortilla).

“We were among the first to put bacon on a cheeseburger, which is why we called it ‘special,’” Ericson said. “Probably a customer at the window said, ‘Hey, will you throw some bacon on my burger?’ We did and it took off (as a best-seller). That's the way a lot of things happen here.”

In that spirit, it feels right that customers gather at the scarred picnic tables in the parking lot that form the “dining room.”

It was Paula Ericson's dad, Emile “Whitey” Boisclair, who opened the drive-in in 1963. The Ericsons became his partners in the early 1980s and eventually took over the business. The city of West Sacramento named a park after the late Boisclair to recognize his decades of sponsoring local youth sports.

“We were born and raised in this town and we know the people, they’re like family,” Ericson said. “This place owns you, but you can tell by the smile on my face that it’s not really work. We still love it.”

## IF YOU GO

Whitey’s Jolly Kone, 1300 Jefferson Blvd., West Sacramento

**Info:** 916-371-3605. No website

**Hours:** 10 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Monday to Thursday.

## EL NOVILLERO: 49 YEARS

The late Jose Davalos, the family patriarch, was a pioneer in Sacramento’s restaurant and bar scene, opening a slew of places in the 1960s and ’70s.

At first, he focused on attracting Mexican laborers looking for a taste of home, but his restaurants eventually became destinations for anyone craving authentic Mexican cuisine.

The jewel turned out to be El Novillero, co-owned by Jose’s son, Joe Davalos, and brothers Albert Davalos, the head cook, and Bob Davalos.

In 1970, Jose Davalos bought the Eat ‘n’ Run burger joint next-door to his nightclub and asked Joe – who was just 17 at the time – “How would you like to open your own place?”

“Dad’s place was called El Matador, and he said, ‘Let’s call your place El Novillero (“apprentice bullfighter”) because I’m the professional and you’re the rookie,” recalled Joe Davalos, 67.

The burger stand became a taco stand, then grew into a landmark over the decades, a sprawling hacienda known for its generous portions of freshly made food from family recipes, some of which Albert Davalos has tweaked to improve them. Albert keeps his recipes in his head and doesn't measure ingredients. "It's all taste," he said.

"The best part is when the customers leave happy and satisfied," Joe Davalos said. "First-timers will order and the server will ask, 'Are you sure you want all that?' And when we bring out the platter, they say, 'Oh, my God!'"

The No. 1 dish is carnitas (shredded pork shoulder), still the restaurant's foundation that Jose Davalos originally cooked in huge copper kettles .

Though dishes are made from fresh local ingredients, "the downtown restaurants seem to get all the Farm-to-Fork publicity, not the ones on the fringes," Davalos said.

"Ex-mayor (Kevin) Johnson comes in and says, 'Man, you guys are busy.' We say, 'Yeah, we don't need a Golden 1 Center to fill our place.' We don't advertise and we don't take reservations, and we still get new (word-of-mouth) customers."

## IF YOU GO

El Novillero, 4216 Franklin Blvd., Sacramento

**Info:** 916-456-4287, [www.elnov.com](http://www.elnov.com).

**Hours:** Lunch is 11 a.m. to 2:20 p.m. (yes, that's correct) Tuesday to Friday. Dinner is 4:30 to 9 p.m. Tuesday to Friday. Lunch/dinner 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday.

