

The Columbus Dispatch

10 years after torches go out, Kahiki memories live

Restaurant with Polynesian theme has devoted fans

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No restaurant with a fire-breathing stone head has ever captured the hearts of Columbus quite like the Kahiki.

The Polynesian eatery took Tiki kitsch to the max with an aviary, indoor thatch huts, umbrella-topped drinks, waterfalls and the deep thrum of drums.

Ten years ago today, the Kahiki closed its doors to make way for a Walgreens pharmacy. The Kahiki name lives on in a Gahanna-based frozen-food company, but company President Alan Hoover says he still gets calls about the restaurant.

"Two months ago, I was leaving the office in the evening and a couple was walking up the front walkway," he said. "I asked if I could help them, and they said, 'Yes, we'd like to have dinner tonight.'

"It's amazing that these things are still happening."

The Kahiki, at 3583 E. Broad St., was the brainchild of Bill Sapp and Lee Henry, also the creators of the Top Steak House near Bexley. Their temple of Tiki opened in 1961 after their Tiki bar, the Grass Shack, burned down.

They built the Kahiki for more than \$1 million (about \$7.3 million today). Sapp said they sold it to help them finance a new restaurant, the Wine Cellar, also long gone now.

"We were sorry within two weeks that we sold it," he said. "We had this great big gong, like 4 to 5 feet across, that went *bong*, and right after we sold it they replaced it with this little thing that went *ting*."

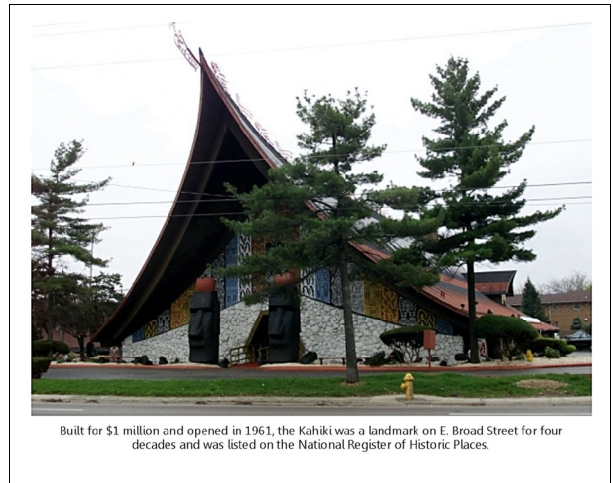
The restaurant went through multiple owners. The last was Michael Tsao, who started the frozen-food business and sold the property to Walgreens. Hoover said it was a smart business move. The restaurant was draining, and Tsao wanted more time to focus on expanding the factory.

Tsao's son Jeff said that before his father unloaded the restaurant he had grand dreams for relocating the Kahiki to the riverfront Downtown. But it never panned out because the factory got busy and government support fell short. Then his father died unexpectedly.

"I don't know if it could ever happen again," Jeff Tsao said. "But we're very, very pleased and thankful that we still have so many fans."

But that doesn't necessarily soften the blow.

"I think a lot of people are still bitter about it. We all miss it," said Stu Koblentz, who was a member of the Ohio Preservation Alliance when the organization labeled the Kahiki one of the top 10 endangered historic buildings in Ohio.



Kahiki fans say the restaurant was a place for special occasions and fond memories.

There are dozens of active Kahiki tribute websites and discussion boards. There are photo albums on TikiCentral.org full of Kahiki swag - drink stirrers, napkins, toothpicks, salt shakers and matchbooks.

Tiki enthusiasts write books and poetry about the restaurant. Columbus resident Jeff Chenault unearthed a 1965 recording of the Beachcomber Trio at the Kahiki.

Dionysus Records produced vinyl copies for sale online, and they're selling.

Other Ohioans remember a prom night, an anniversary getaway, playing table games in the basement or bouncing with excitement as a child, sipping virgin mixed drinks and roasting meatballs over an open flame. Zsa Zsa Gabor famously ordered milk.

"When I was a kid and we'd drive by the huge sloping roof with dragons and torches, it always seemed to me to be a grounded ship on E. Broad Street," Newark resident Lesa Best said in an e-mail.

"There were macaws in the bar, and the booth walls were lined with aquariums, or 'rain forests' complete with thunderous sound effects. By the '80s, it was past its prime, definitely, and cheesy? Yes it was. But my friends and family loved going because it was different, it was campy and the food was really quite good.

"I long for just one more Mystery Drink."

Each time someone made a pilgrimage to the Kahiki, they would take word back to their hometowns.

"When I was a kid growing up in Pittsburgh, my dad regularly traveled to Columbus on business," said Worthington resident Bill Nordquist. "We had a postcard picture of the exterior, and in the mid-1970s I had never seen anything like that."

Even some people who never went to the Kahiki said they were dismayed to hear it would be torn down.

Jennifer Akers grew up nearby and begged her parents to take her there for her birthday. They told her the Kahiki wasn't in the budget for a family of six, so she never set a foot inside.

But when she heard the Kahiki was auctioning off its wares, she had her chance. Now she owns a copy of its blueprints.

"I spent hours and lots of dollars buying treasure," she said. "I have boxes of menus, match boxes, napkins, cups. I have the boss' couch right out of his office."

New Yorker Frank Decaro flew to Columbus when he heard the Kahiki was closing. Ten years later, he still can't believe they tore it down.

"At the point when the last great Tiki bar closes, someone will open a new one and everyone will say these are great," he said. "It's a shame we always seem to realize too late how much things mean to us."

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