

History Lesson: The history of Columbus' most famed 'lost' restaurant – The Kahiki

By: Doug Motz

Many restaurants that have their roots in Columbus have made significant contributions to American culture. Marzetti's salad dressing is the offshoot of a popular downtown eatery that was known for – you guessed it – salad dressing. Bob Evans began right here in town and is still operating from South High Street. Cries of “Where's the Beef?” likely still reverberate in the corridors of the Catholic Foundation (site of the original Wendy's restaurant) across from old Memorial Hall which once housed the Center for Science and Industry. And how would Neil Patrick Harris' career ever have been rebooted without “*Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle*”? (Technically, White Castle started in Wichita, Kansas in 1921 but moved to Columbus in 1934 and has been here ever since).

We are also lucky to have so many fantastic independent restaurants that have stood the test of time. Schmidt's, Rigsby's, Otani, The Top, Wings, TAT, Sun Tong Luck, and the Refectory have all been in operation for at least 25 years. In fact, the Columbus Historical Society is celebrating many of these during the October 4th “[Savor the City: Classic Columbus Cocktails and Cuisine](#)” party on the riverfront patio at our new home at COSI.

But for me, the classic “lost” Columbus restaurant will always be equated with the crazy billboard at Hamilton and Livingston Avenue which would mechanically “wink” at me every Sunday morning when my parents drove us from our home in the Huber subdivision of Reynoldsburg to Brookwood Presbyterian Church in Bexley. The Polynesian Goddess on the billboard beckoning me to join her for dinner and drinks on East Broad Street scared the devil out of me and I would duck down behind the seat of my parents' station wagon for fear she would see me. Little did I know how that mystery girl would find her way into the hearts of hundreds, if not thousands, of Central Ohioans.

Of course, for many of us of a certain generation, I am writing about the late great KAHIKI.

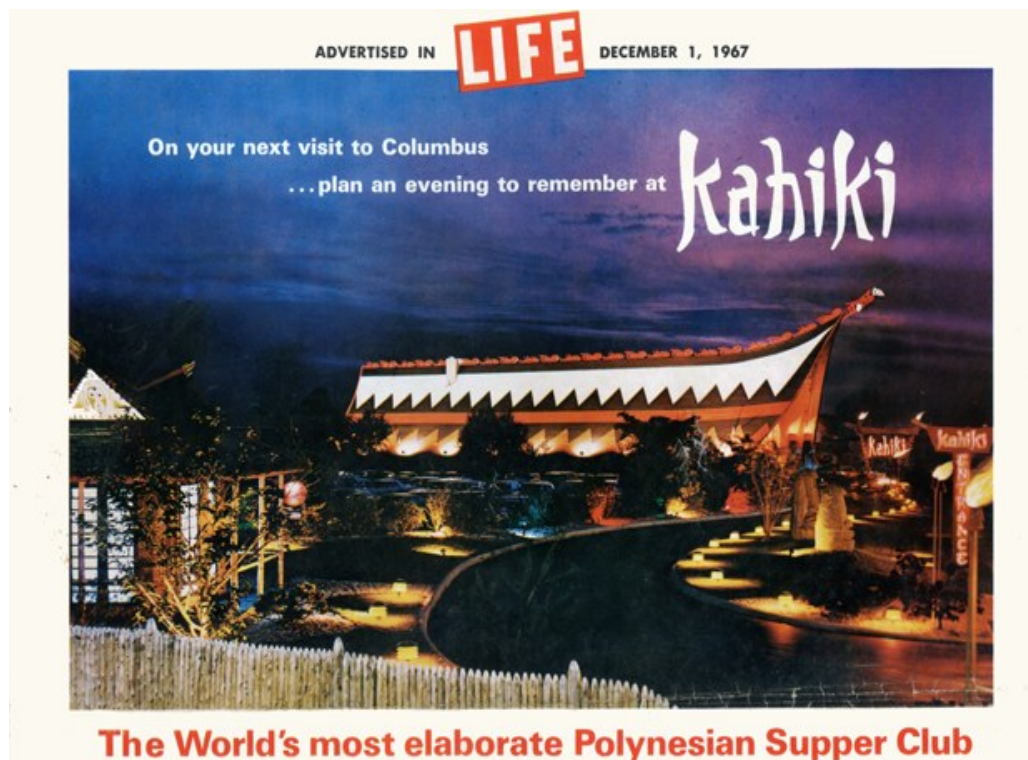


What an impressive entrance!

The mother ship of all South Seas themed restaurants was located at East Broad Street and Napoleon across from the Dessert Inn (and one-time Playboy club!). It was an easy landmark to identify. Shaped like a Polynesian fighting boat 40 feet tall with giant flaming Moai Heads outside the main doors that opened up into a tropical rainforest and reproduction of a typical Pacific Islander tribal village.

The Kahiki, whose name literally translates as “Sail to Tahiti” according to an undated Kahiki pamphlet, has its’ roots in another of Columbus’ most venerated restaurants – The Top Steakhouse. Lee Henry and Bill Sapp had been operating The Top for 3 years when in 1957 they thought that Columbus could support another supper club and began traveling around the country in search of inspiration. In their travels, it struck them that all of the Polynesian restaurants they visited were doing very well and offered a more casual experience than many of the other clubs of the era. Thus, the idea of the Kahiki began to take shape.

The pair hired Coburn Morgan to oversee the design and decorations of the Kahiki and architects Ned Eller and Ralph Sounik of Design Associates. (According to Dispatch reporter Elizabeth Gibson, they had the space because a previous Tiki Bar they owned called the Grass Shack had burned down). Construction began in June of 1960 at a cost of over a million dollars and the Kahiki opened her legendary doors in February of 1961.



The design of the building was based on men’s meeting houses of New Guinea and the details featured along the curved roof were found on many of the war canoes of the region. Pelicans and fish lined the apex of the roof, thought to be symbols of plentiful good food. Two replicas of the Easter Island heads stood guard at the doorway that was lined with murals to ward away evil spirits.

My own strongest childhood memory of the architecture is of the shell washbasins found in the bathrooms and the “Thunder and Lighting” occurring in the tropical rainforests that lined the sides of the village interior. Also featured were giant wall-sized aquariums filled with tropical fish of the South Pacific.

The Outrigger and Maui bars were on either side of the foyer and often the Beachcomber Trio could be found playing a fusion of Latin jazz and Polynesian melodies. The trio players were Bob Chalfant on piano, Henry Burch on Vibraphone, conga, bells and trumpet, and Marsh Padillo on guitar, flute and percussion. In 1965, they cut a record and it was recently re-released in vinyl by Dionysous Records.



The Beachcomber Trio.

According to the pamphlet:

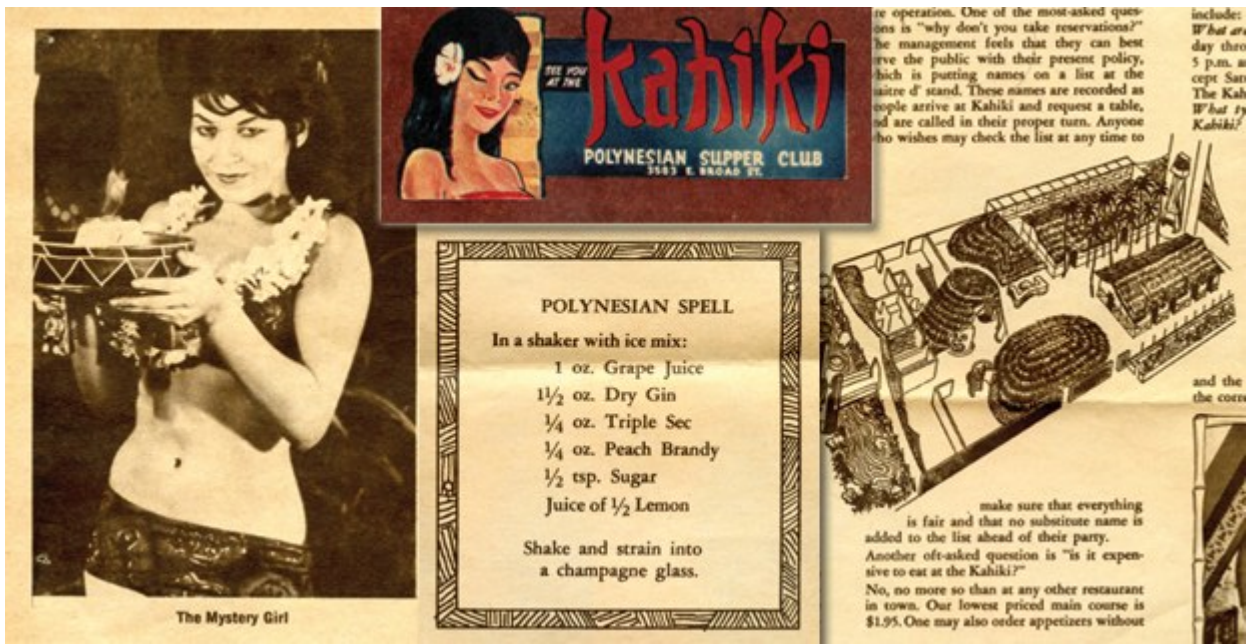
“Most of the cocktail waitresses are the wives of servicemen or ex-servicemen and all are from Japan or Korea. Although none of them had experience in this type of work, they were all trained rigidly for a two-month period prior to the Kahiki opening in February.”



The Maui Girls.

So patrons were immersed in a total world of the South Seas and while there, could order their choice of exotic fare and island drinks. The Kahiki offered up such drinks as Malayan Mist, Blue Hurricane, Instant Urge, Maiden's Prayer, Misty Isle, Jungle Fever, Head Hunter, Zombie, and the Smoking Eruption. Each one of these cocktails had its' own sculpted mug designed just for the drinker who could then purchase it from the gift shop and take it home as a souvenir. (Mrs. Sapp herself made the original mug for the Zombie!) The various bars of the Kahiki used up to 1,000 pineapples and 2,000 bottles of rum monthly to keep up with demand. According to the pamphlet they once sold over 18,000 Polynesian drinks during the month of May alone!

As amazing as all these drinks sound, the pen-ultimate Kahiki drink had to have been the "Mystery Drink" which was made to serve 4 people and contained 8 ounces of rum and brandy. Served in a bowl with a smoking volcano in the middle, it was served by the "Mystery Girl" who ceremoniously danced it to your table after being summoned by a giant gong.



The service of this drink was meant to symbolize an ancient sacrificial ritual that supposedly stopped volcanoes from erupting. According to legend, the maiden chosen for the sacrifice was usually the Chieftains daughter. After several days of ceremony, feasting and luaus, the young lady would climb the volcano and fling herself into its crater – yikes!

At the Kahiki, this was altered to have the mystery girl present the drink to the main Tiki in the restaurant and then after bowing to the idol, would bring the smoking bowl to the diner and present it to their party along with a lei of orchids which were flown in 2-3 times a week from Hilo, Hawaii.



The Kahiki was also a draw for visiting celebrities, including Milton Berle, Andy Williams, Robert Goulet and famously Zsa Zsa Gabor who allegedly ordered milk – of all things! (It would seem likely that most of these folks were in town for Summer Stock performances of the Kenley Players at Vets Memorial– but that is a story for another day.)



A sad day in Columbus history.

But all the mystery girls, leis, pineapples and celebrities couldn't keep pace with the march of time and the Kahiki went through a slew of owners. In 1988 Michael Tsao took over complete ownership and in 1995, began a frozen food company to market Kahiki in grocery stores.

In 1997 the building was put onto the National Register of Historic Places, but on June 30, 2000 was sold to Walgreen's corporation and the doors were shut forever on August 25, 2000. The demolition crew literally had to open up the roof to get the large Tiki fireplace out and my thanks to Mike Monello for getting this sad but amazing photograph of the heart of the Kahiki being ripped out.

A dozen years have passed and still the spell cast by the Kahiki remains powerful. So much so, that the fine folks of the Columbus Food League will soon open their own Polynesian-themed supper club – Grass Skirt. When I visited Grass Skirt recently, Managing Partner Carmen Owens suggested that it could be open as soon as late September. She also relayed that there would be a special place at Grass Skirt that will pay homage to the wonderland that was the Kahiki.

So with the memories of a winking Mystery Girl and the Beachcomber Trio blaring on the hi-fi while I sip on a marvelous "Polynesian Spell" I bid you all a fond Aloha!