

Lede
Changing Hoffbrau
Villarreal, Dustin

A Historical Stake on Steak

The steaks won't stop sizzling until the cows come home if the customers of the Hoffbrau have anything to say about it. Mooing and shaking since Aug. 4, 1934 on the western side of Austin's infamous Sixth Street, the little restaurant that could has been grilling along the best way it knows how: by staying just the way it is.

"If it ain't broke don't fix it," Ruben Ray, co-owner of the Hoffbrau, said. "But there are some things you have to do to keep your business afloat."

Ray, along with his wife and co-owner Mary Gail Ray, bought the steak joint 25 years ago from Mary's grandfather and original owner Robert Hamby, finding out early on that change isn't taken lightly by the regulars of the Hoffbrau.

"What else you gonna change?" Ruben Ray shouts out, imitating one of the many customer exchanges over the years. "When I put in the air conditioners, people griped. When I put in the credit card machines, people moaned. There are emotional ties to it all."

The customers are a diverse herd that have stampeded the steak joint during its Tuesday through Saturday hours of operation, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. for lunch and 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. for dinner, "the same as it ever was" in the words of Ray.

Ranging anyone from veterans that have been roaming in the past 40 to 60 years to well-known figures such as Texas Governor Rick Perry, Wally Scott, and former football player Earl Campbell, the Hoffbrau has shepherded in a mixture over time.

"Which ones aren't dead yet?" Ray quips to a nearby waitress as she recalls Campbell's usual menu of choice.

"He actually doesn't order steak. He eats chicken, a large salad, and some onion rings. Oh, and a sprite," Paula, a waitress at the Hoffbrau for more than 12 years, said.

The Hoffbrau is lined wall to wall with a down-home, southern hospitality feel, old pictures of customers decorating the doorways, a detailed painting of 'Custer's Last Fight' hanging above the front window, and a sign that reads "if you are grouchy, irritable, or just plain mean, there will be a \$10 charge for putting up with you."

That kind of service and atmosphere has the staff to thank, three of whom have been serving for more than 30 years and the rest working under the roof of the restaurant for ten years onward.

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“We’re one of the oldest in town, we’re the original owners,” Ray said. “It just gets in your blood I guess.”

Ray, who is also on the chancellor board at the University of Texas at Austin, says that he has met a lot of people, done a lot of business, and understands that times do change in a city that is quickly modernizing and constructing, all with the idea of “new” on the mind.

“You build a business, but you keep building it . . . and you hold on,” Ray said.

Although Ray is in the process of getting the Hoffbrau’s well-recognized salad dressing onto the store shelves of the Whole Foods store chain, he doesn’t think that the old steak joint itself is in any rush to change in the face of Austin’s construction—at least not anytime soon.

“We’ve been in the same spot for so many years, but at some point, our kids are going to have to make a change, upgrade,” Ray said. “Every business knows their peaks and valleys. They might have to do that down the road.”

Whether the change comes sooner or later, if at all, the customers will likely have the final say about it, a fact Ray has come to know all too well over the years.

“How was it!?” Ray shouts out to another paying regular of the Hoffbrau.

“It was good, that’s the reason I’m here, ain’t it!?” The customer yells back.

If the history coating the walls is anything to go by, generations of customers already agree.