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FAVORITE FARE: HOT-BUTTON ISSUES



Randy Rayburn, owner of Sunset Grill, Midtown Cafe and Cabana, works the host stand at Midtown Cafe with bartender Consuelo Solis-King. Rayburn also has been stirring the political pot, leading the local charge against a law allowing permit holders to carry guns in restaurants where alcohol is served. SHELLEY MAYS / THE TENNESSEAN

Restaurateur stirs up political pots

By Bonna Johnson
THE TENNESSEAN

Five days a week, restaurant owner Randy Rayburn runs the door of the Midtown Cafe, a 21-table spot beloved for one of Nashville's best business lunches — just one of the ways he has trimmed costs during the recession.

But belt-tightening by not hiring a maitre d' will only get you so far.

For Rayburn, who also owns two other Nashville eateries, a lifetime of serving up gustatory satisfaction with consistency and attention to detail has helped him weather the weaker economy, as well as cope with the whims of Nashville's A-list diners.

The fact that the affable Rayburn knows just about everyone in town doesn't hurt, either.

"You're never just a party of four with Randy," says business partner Craig

Cliff, who first worked for Rayburn 22 years ago as a busboy. "He knows what you do, about your family and where the kids are going to college."

Rayburn's imprint on Nashville's dining scene dates to the late 1980s, when he introduced Nashvillians to sun-dried tomatoes in their salads when he was general manager and part-owner at F. Scott's in Green Hills. In 1990, when he opened Sunset Grill, a casual upscale space in Hillsboro Village, he elevated the concept of wine by the glass to a new level.

His innovative culinary contributions to Nashville these past few decades have come with a robust side order of community activism, often putting him in the middle of contentious local issues and at risk of estranging some customers.

» RAYBURN, 2E

JOHN RANDALL (RANDY) RAYBURN

Age: 59

Hometown: Milan, Tenn.

Occupation: Owner, Sunset Grill; majority owner, Midtown Cafe; majority partner in Cabana restaurant

Education: University of Tennessee, political science with philosophy minor, 1974

Family: Wife, Sonata Stanton-Rayburn; son, Duke Rainier, almost 2

Activities: Board member, Nashville State Community College and Nashville Convention Center; head of local chapter of Chaine des Rotisseurs, a food and wine society; and member of Commanderie de Bordeaux, a small chapter of Bordeaux wine lovers.

Rayburn shows aplomb in the kitchen and politics

» RAYBURN FROM 1E

With his latest cause, he's more concerned about diners who want to pack heat than the heat-packed punch of Sunset Grill's signature Voodoo pasta.

Rayburn is a vocal opponent of a new Tennessee law that allows gun owners with a state permit to carry their concealed handguns into bars and restaurants that serve alcohol.

"I'll lose some business because of this," says Rayburn, who is a gun owner. "But I'm 59 and old enough to do what I want."

Last week, he appeared on a national broadcast of *ABC World News* and was interviewed by CNN for his part in filing a lawsuit trying to stop the law. Ultimately, he hopes to persuade state lawmakers to repeal the rule when they return to the capitol next year.

"Randy's always been engaged, active and supportive of various issues he feels passionate about," says Butch Spyridon, president of the Nashville Convention & Visitors Bureau. "It could be the hospitality industry, Hillsboro Village, even the new convention center."

For this restaurateur, the way to the heart of civic affairs can certainly be through the stomach.

"When you see leaders of the community every day, all year long, you have their ear and friendship, and that gives you the opportunity to make a case," Spyridon says.

Paving the way

Rayburn is one of Nashville's longest-serving restaurant owners still actively involved in day-to-day operations — the dean, if you will, of independent operators.

It's said, according to Clift, that, if you live in Nashville, Rayburn has hired you, fired you or fed you.

"When you look at the creative, locally sourced

food that's being served now, none of that would have happened without Sunset Grill," says Jeremy Barlow, chef and owner at Tayst, who also credits other notable owners, including Deb Paquette of Restaurant Zola, Rick Balsam of Tin Angel and Margot McCormack of Margot Cafe & Bar, as top creative influences in Nashville's restaurant scene.

"That allowed a restaurant like mine, which is a little bit different, a little bit funky, to open," says Barlow, whose dishes always seem to have a playful twist. "He's a pioneer, and without people like him, I'd question whether a place like Tayst would be open and whether the city would enjoy a restaurant with food like we're doing."

Last week at Midtown Cafe, the room was mostly filled with men in ties and women in pumps, but Rayburn effortlessly managed to make a trio of tourists, decked out in shorts and lugging heavy suitcases, feel at ease with a warm, "How may we serve you today?"

The master of the 60-second conversation, Rayburn knows how to catch up on life and talk about the weather between the time you walk in and get seated. Rayburn can talk to anyone about anything even though he swears he grew up shy.

On most days, Rayburn will serve as maitre d' during lunch at Midtown, drive his black Mercedes S500 to Sunset Grill for a late meal and office work, return to Midtown for the dinner hour and end his day at 9 or 10 p.m. back at Sunset. He also co-owns Cabana in Hillsboro Village, which he opened four years ago with Clift and Executive Chef Brian Uhl.

"I like the high-wire act. I run on adrenaline," says Rayburn, tugging at the short whiskers in his gray-speckled beard. "I love the activity and passion of the kitchen, balanced by the

RAYBURN'S ACTIVISM

Restaurant owner Randy Rayburn has been increasingly involved in civic affairs:

■ He opposes a new Tennessee law that permits guns in restaurants and bars and is part of a group that has filed a lawsuit to stop the law.

■ He is a longtime member of Nashville's convention center board and was an early booster of the proposed Music City Center.

■ He helped install a two-year culinary arts program at Nashville State Community College when Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center closed its culinary institute in 2001. Rayburn hired the first graduate.

■ He helped lead a charge for a statewide smoking ban in restaurants that took effect two years ago.

■ He successfully advocated in the late 1990s for an urban design overlay — the first in Nashville — to help Hillsboro Village retain its vintage character in the face of rapid development.

— BONNA JOHNSON

deftness of dealing with the individual customer."

Two years ago, annual net revenue for his trio of restaurants was \$10 million. This year, revenue is expected to dip to just over \$7 million, he said.

"But I'm in the black, and our bank loan got renewed," he said.

Rayburn named himself general manager at Midtown and Sunset Grill as cost-saving measures. He requires his wait staff to clear their own tables; he laid off most of the busboys. His payroll, numbering 160 employees two years ago, has been trimmed to 119 at the three restaurants today.

Innovations he's introduced over the years have helped keep things balanced at a time when no one wants to spend much money.

During the post-Sept. 11 economic slump, Rayburn bought a shuttle van to transport tourists free of charge from nearby hotels to his restaurants. He owns three vans now — and with 1,300 hotel rooms within a two-block radius of Midtown, tourists make up as much as 30 percent of his business.

When a Midtown Cafe

patron mentioned having trouble finding parking at the city's Schermerhorn Symphony Center, he began offering complimentary shuttles to certain downtown events with a dinner reservation at Midtown Cafe.

He often puts gift cards on sale, has a renowned late-night menu and this summer is offering a \$19.99 steak-and-sides special. "There are very few new ideas under the sun," he says. "I know how to find a good concept and adapt it to my business needs."

Stickler, not shtick

Rayburn's dad owned a barbershop at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis. His mom ran three dress stores, including one where Priscilla Presley sometimes shopped. He was mostly raised by a grandmother who taught him how to cook with fresh ingredients from her 2½-acre garden on a 28-acre farm. He worked at the Milan Supermarket in high school.

Rayburn got his start in Nashville's dining scene as a busboy in 1975; worked his way through a series of Nashville restaurants and in

the early 1980s ran the Opryland hotel's beverage division and Rhett's, then its largest restaurant.

He attended law school and a culinary institute, but never finished either. "I like to dabble," Rayburn says.

He once invested in a restaurant before realizing the owners had never incorporated. The same group in 1988 opened a place called People's of Carters Court in Franklin, which was never profitable under his direction.

"Lesson learned — that you must be on site as much as possible in order to succeed and implement the vision and execution of the plan and training of the staff," says Rayburn, who soon after turned an old bicycle shop in Hillsboro Village into Sunset Grill with \$90,000 from selling a home and a friend's \$50,000 investment.

That's why, despite back problems, an adorable nearly 2-year-old child at home and years of success, Rayburn is at one restaurant or another six days a week.

Ever the stickler for details, Rayburn's eye catches everything.

Heading into Sunset Grill last week, he stopped to pick up paper trash on the sidewalk outside, a lesson ingrained from his days at Opryland. He gently chastised a valet employee for not tucking in the top edge of a bag into the trashcan.

That sounds just like Rayburn, says Chris Lowry, co-owner of Germantown Cafe and Allium, who used to work as a manager at Midtown under Rayburn.

"At the time, his behavior seemed a little irrational," Lowry says. "It was like, 'Really?' But I understand it 100 percent now that I'm an owner."

In an age in which every new restaurant has its own shtick — whether promoting itself as being the greenest around or having the best view of downtown — Rayburn remains at the top

of his game.

"Randy has his finger on every single detail of his restaurant," Lowry said. "From the moment the customer walks into the door to the last invoice at the end of the month, he knows everything, and that is impressive and intimidating."

Life outside food

Rayburn still obsesses about whether the air temperature or lighting is just right. But he's mellowed in some ways, too.

No one works 80-hour weeks anymore. Managers work five days a week, not six. He tells employees to have a life.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, his wife and young son join him for an early dinner while he's on post at Sunset Grill.

He first met Sonata Stanton four years ago when she walked into Sunset Grill. The second time they met, they struck up a conversation at Cabana.

She was enamored with all things Grace Kelly. He had been to Monaco five times. They kissed four hours later.

Married for three years now, they have a date night at least once a week. And, if they eat out, it's only at independent restaurants.

Rayburn's done his time with various charity and civic organizations. He even almost ran for Metro Council earlier this year.

But he couldn't stand the thought of being stuck in meetings at City Hall when he'd rather be with family.

Of late, he's duelled with conservative columnist Phil Valentine on the guns-in-bars issue. And when he tussled with state Sen. Doug Jackson on CNN, Jackson quipped, "The most dangerous place to be in Nashville is between Randy Rayburn and a TV camera."

Rayburn can take the heat, in or out of the kitchen.

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