Restaurants Special

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Park presents a different kind of challenge. Even Kleinler complains about the retrograde aesthetic sensibilities of Hyde Parkers—“Where they are now there’s no real fashion or design.” When the U. of C. recruited Kleinler to the Hyde Park property over two years ago, he wasn’t taken by it. “It’s like, what is this shit? What an ugly effing building!” He’s since gutted it, knocking out more than half a wall to put in a series of huge French doors. The renovated space will have a dark hardwood floor, custom-made furniture, silk light fixtures, and a “bookcase of wine” along the back. The menu’s described as comfort food with a twist. “My feeling is to create something that has a little bit of flair to it, but not too much,” Kleinler says, calling it “a sophisticated approach to non-sophistication.”

Shortly after the Hyde Park space unlocks its mahogany doors, Kleinler will open his tenth restaurant, still undefined (“I always name everything when I see it, and it’s very open,” says Sabre Tyler. “So at any given time you might have one class cooking one thing, and baking and pastry cooking something else, and there’s a bartending thing going on in the hallway, so students start exchanging dishes with baking and pastry and food production, and they’re all feeding each other.”)

FAMOUS ALUMS Mario Garcia, sous-chef at Hilton Chicago and named a top local professional under 30 by the Sun-Times in 2003; Andrew Johnson, pastry chef at Charlie Trotter’s; Marc Kuchenbecker, head chef at the Tasting Room at 900 N. North Branch, a mile south of his other South Loop restaurants. In the renovated banquet space iron columns stretch from floor to ceiling, a 35-foot span. Behind the bar there are 12 shelves ascending to the roof, unreachable bottles of Grey Goose on each. The color scheme is dark hardwood floor, custom-made furniture, silk light fixtures, and a “bookcase of wine” along the back. The menu’s described as comfort food with a twist. “My feeling is to create something that has a little bit of flair to it, but not too much,” Kleinler says, calling it “a sophisticated approach to non-sophistication.”

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Six years ago. For the associate’s degree, students are prepped to work in every kitchen position below head chef; for the bachelor’s they’re schooled in every aspect of the restaurant business, including the back office and boardroom.

TEACHING RESTAURANT Backstage Bistro, 180 N. Wabash, 312-475-6920

WHAT THE SCHOOL SAYS “You have a chef and a restaurant management person running this school, and that’s a big positive,” says chef Mark Facklam, culinary arts director. “It makes sure all those restaurant-management-type classes like purchasing and cost control and menu management are up to snuff.”

WHAT THE STUDENTS SAY “The environment is very friendly and it’s very open,” says Sabre Tyler. “So at any given time you might have one class cooking one thing, and baking and pastry cooking something else, and there’s a bartending thing going on in the hallway, so students start exchanging dishes with baking and pastry and food production, and they’re all feeding each other.”

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WHAT’S THE DAMAGE? $37,690 total for the AAS, $70,450 for the BAS, $830 for knives, utensils, and uniforms. Financial aid and scholarships are available.

KENDALL COLLEGE, SCHOOL OF CULINARY ARTS
900 N. North Branch | 866-667-3344 | kendall.edu

DEGREES BA and AAS in culinary arts, with accelerated AAS option: AAS in baking and pastry, certificates in baking and pastry, professional catering/personal chef, and professional cooking.

IN BRIEF Founded in 1985, it’s the only school in town to offer a BA that combines practical training with course work in management, business, nutrition, English, comp, Spanish, and more. (For more see Martha Bayne’s story on page 10.)

TEACHING RESTAURANT The Dining Room at Kendall College, 900 N. North Branch, 312-732-3088

WHAT THE SCHOOL SAYS “Here students are sitting in the best facility in the United States.”

The First Family of Fried Chicken

How Harold’s Chicken Shack grew from a mom-and-pop stand to a chain 62 strong and still expanding.

By Mike Sula

H arold’s Chicken Shack, the ubiquitous south-side and south-suburban fast-food chain identified by a maniacal monarch chowing a chicken with a hatchet, is a confederacy of individual outfits. And many of them offer their own interpretations of the way Harold Pierce, the Fried Chicken King who died nearly two decades ago, meant his birds to be prepared.

Back in 1950, five years before Ray Kroc opened his first McDonald’s and two years before the Colonel began franchising his secret recipe, Pierce was sitting in the barbershop at 69th and South Park with some buddies, playing checkers and talking chicken. He and his wife, Hilda, ran a restaurant on 39th called the H & H, and they specialized in chicken feet with dumplings, a recipe he thought could be adapted for fried chicken. Gene Rosen, who owned a pharmacy shop down the street, offered him a few birds to fry up for the guys, and they liked the results so much that Pierce opened a take-out joint at 47th and Greenwood, with Rosen supplying the chickens. That was the original Harold’s Chicken Shack.

Pierce, who grew up in Midway, Alabama, never dreamed the joint would spawn an empire that reached as far as Atlanta, much less the north side—No. 66 is supposed to open in Wicker Park later this month. The next few stores were trademark agreements with family and friends. He put $80 in their registers, told them to get their chickens from Rosen, and expected them to pay him a 42-cent royalty per bird.

His daughter Kristen, now CEO of Harold’s Chicken Shack Inc., says he kept his accounts in his head and knew exactly who owed what when. “He would call you and tell you to come in and bring his money,” she says. “He had a one-on-one relationship with everybody, and everybody respected him.”

And most knew not to try to get anything over on him. His son J.R. Pierce, who now handles training and development for the chain, remembers his father once caught his cousin “bootlegging”—buying chickens from a different supplier and not reporting the sales. “My dad actually knocked two of his teeth out,” he says. But afterward “they just went back to being cousins and working.”

Pierce did well, but he didn’t trust
banks. “At one time he had an apartment in the Shoreland Hotel, and there was a cedar closet where he kept all his money,” says J.R. “Whenever he would go to pick up money at the stores he would put it in chicken bags—just like he was walking out with chicken. He was close to his 60s before he ever got a credit card.”

Early on people began calling Pierce the Fried Chicken King, so he designed the logo of the hatchet-wielding sovereign, who later on became a chef. He also designed the chain’s distinctive faux redbrick walls and white painted archways. On the wall of every shack hung a framed photograph of His Majesty, smiling benignly, his chin supported by a hand bearing a golden pinkie ring, the wrist wrapped in a diamond-studded Bulova.

Once a new shack was up and running Pierce was hands-off, and many franchises began deviating from the standards he’d set. He’d developed a 14- to 15-minute cooking process, and since chickens were fried to order, everyone expected to wait. But over time some operators began taking shortcuts, using different hot sauces or barbecue sauces, or tinkering with the seasoning. That’s why one day a customer would find a potato or another even though they were only a few blocks apart.

By 1975 Pierce had 20 shacks around the city. In a Reader profile that year he attributed his success to having “sand in my paw,” meaning the grit hammy foot eat to help them digest their food. He didn’t think he could risk opening in white neighborhoods. “They’d kick my ass out,” he said. In the early 80s he retired to a piece of land he’d developed an eight-minute frying process, in which the chicken is cooked for five minutes, left hanging in the basket until an order comes in, and then dropped back into the grease. Unlike their father, J.R. and Kristen kept it growing.

Today the siblings rule the kingdom from a small office suite in Hazel Crest. A giant gilt-framed photograph of their father hangs over a leather sofa in the waiting room. Over the years J.R. ran a couple different shacks, which helps explain the chain’s disordered numbering system. No. 11, his first shack, closed in the mid-90s, but its number was never reassigned; No. 56, his second shack, now operates under a different owner but its original number. As other stores opened and closed over the decades, some were renumbered and some weren’t. The original No. 1, Harold’s first shack, is long gone; the current No. 1, at 7139 S. State, used to be No. 6—though it appears to have closed last year. No. 92 is in Milwaukee; No. 94 is in Minneapolis, but there’s no longer a No. 93. For that matter there’s no longer a 16, 42, 43, 44, 45, or 78, though there could be again someday.

The chain now has 62 outlets, including franchises in Detroit and Atlanta. More will open later this year in Wrigleyville, Indianapolis, and Saint Louis. Many of the older stores look decidedly less than regal: they’re dark and dingy, the neon signs above, the staff take money from behind bulletproof glass. The two siblings are trying to modernize the shacks and eliminate the inconsistencies from one to the next. They’re also pushing changes in the product. Contending that customers no longer have the patience to wait 15 minutes, J.R. has developed an eight-minute frying process, in which the chicken is fried for five minutes, left hanging in the basket until an order comes in, and then dropped back into the grease.

Unlike their father, J.R. and Kristen are hands-on—J.R. has even started doing surprise evaluations. But like Harold, they’re sticklers about cooking, issuing a written complaint for the first violation and a $250 fine for the second. J.R. says that after a third he’ll call his lawyer, though he hasn’t had to go that far yet. They’ve also updated their cut of the chain’s sales—Harold’s Chicken Shack Inc. now gets 6 percent of everything the franchises sell, not just the chickens.

Harold never cared about that kind of consistency. He just wanted his money. “He never was one to just run around,” says J.R. “Basically everybody ran their stores, and they just paid him the royalties. He never expected it to get where it got. He just cruised. He just had fun.”

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WHAT THE STUDENTS SAY: “It’s hands-on learning,” says Caitlyn Derrico. “There are a lot of events that we go and help with outside of school, and you meet a lot of chefs and get your name out there.”

FAMOUS ALUMS: None yet. Students from the first graduating classes are working at Tru and Heaven on Seven and in R & D at McDonald’s corporate headquarters.

WHAT’S THE DAMAGE? $5,100 per quarter; the AAS program is six quarters, the bachelor’s twelve. The school gives scholarships of its own and assists in locating outside aid.

TEACHING RESTAURANT: The Parrot Cage, 7059 S. South Shore Dr. 773-602-5333

WHAT THE SCHOOL SAYS: “It’s been around since 1937, which makes it by far the oldest cooking school [in the U.S.] with the most experience,” says provost William Reynolds. “And being part of the city college system, it adds another level of college experience.”

WHAT THE STUDENTS SAY: “A lot of people I knew were graduating from Washburne,” says Eioleta Morales. “I was thinking, ‘What should I choose, a school with higher prestige or Washburne?’ I decided I’m going to Washburne because all the people I met there are somebody new—they own their own business. They’re teachers, but they’re chefs.”

FAMOUS ALUMS: Larry Raymond, creator of the Weirdware logo, original artwork, and a prominent display of the original chicken here was explosively juicy, obviously fried to order in clean, fresh oil. The second-lowest-scoring shack, at 5.1429, was perhaps the busiest, No. 62 at 636 S. Wabash, one of three downtown stores.

WASHBURNE CULINARY INSTITUTE
7059 S. South Shore Dr. (773-602-5487) kennedyking.ccc.edu/washburne

DEGREES: AAS in culinary arts and baking and pastry; certificates in the same.

IN BRIEF: Washburne, part of Kennedy-King College, relocated last year and will soon move again, to a 150,000-square-foot facility on 63rd and Halsted that’s scheduled to open in September 2007. The new digs will allow the school to triple the number of students it admits yearly (currently 100).

THE WEIRDWARE CONNECTION

The innovative cuisine at Alinea, Grant Achatz’s forward-looking “food lab,” is meant to appeal to all five senses. Each element of the restaurant, down to the block it’s located on, has been hand-picked for its contribution to the total dining experience. So Achatz wasn’t going to be content loading up on salad bowls and silverware at a local restaurant supply store. Instead he turned to designer Martin Kastner and his studio, Crucial Detail, to create a unique line of innovative serveware with a simple purpose—the enjoyment of delicious food.

Heather Kenny

Those cork presenters and anti-plates and bacon-holding bow have to come from somewhere.

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FAMOUS ALUMS: Larry Raymond, creator of the Weirdware logo, original artwork, and a prominent display of the original

WHAT’S THE DAMAGE? $11,163 for the culinary arts AAS, plus $2,037 for the baking and pastry degree; 95 percent of current students get financial aid.

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amazing how rare well-cooked fries are. Packaging counted: was the meal carefully wrapped or tossed in the bag? Cleanliness—were there dead flies trapped between the neon lights and the window? Did the air smell of sour mop water? In decor the shack that scored highest seemed true to Harold’s Pierce’s original restaurant design. Points were awarded for neon and prominent display of the original logo, original artwork, and a framed portrait of Harold Pierce. I quickly recognized the primary flaw in my evaluative process. Since I only had the guts to visit each of these shack once, how could I be sure a low-scoring shack wasn’t just having a bad day? For this reason I have determined my system to have a high margin of error; when you’ve eaten at 35 Harold’s Chicken Shacks, you can quibble. Even so, there was no clear winner. Most shacks scored in the six-to-seven-point range, with a few on the lower end of the scale. The highest score, 8.3143, was for Harold’s No. 55, at 100 E. 87th, one of the newer shacks in the city. Owned by Percy and Carolyn Billings, who run a few others, the bird here was explosively juicy, obviously fried to order in clean, fresh oil. The second-lowest-scoring shack, at 5.1429, was perhaps the busiest, No. 62 at 636 S. Wabash, one of three downtown stores. The chicken here was large, but so gamy and soggy I felt guilty giving it to a panhandler. The shack with the lowest (No. 40, 4.9231) and second-highest (No. 4B, 8.000) scores are both owned by the same man, Lavern Burnett, who used to deliver chickens for Harold Pierce. With 14 city franchises to his name, he owns more than anyone else. Then in November, Number 2 reopened under new owners: CBN Inc. I was ambivalent about the news—CBN owns No. 53, which received a very respectable score (7.4286) but also No. 65 (5.5714). Inside the new No. 2 looked just as hopeless as before, though the menu had expanded. Hanging on the wall were about a dozen paper plates marked with sides that departed from Harold’s usual fare: mac ’o' cheese, mustard and turnip greens, hush puppies, sweet potato pie, okra, string beans and potatoes, corn bread dressing, baby lima beans. It was hard to see how the single harried guy behind the glass could handle the home-style eats. He was sweating down what sounded like a confounding order over the phone and took a full ten minutes to get to me, apologizing that his helper was out on a delivery. Because of this my chicken took close to 15 minutes to fry. I’m not complaining—it got a 9 for freshness, and the guy threw in an extra wing for my trouble, earning him a 10+ on the service score. But the chicken itself was puny, the bread was dry, and the fries-grease-bread ratio didn’t even approach that of the magical old No. 2, which brought the new store’s score down to a respectable but hardly laudable 6.7143.
Achatz and Kastner have been working together since 2003, when Achatz was the head chef at Trio in Evanston. Kastner, who started Crucial Detail in San Diego in 1998, was one of 30 designers who received an e-mail from Achatz looking for a collaborator. Though Kastner had limited experience making serving pieces—his background is jewelry designer—he responded. According to Achatz, he was the only designer that did. Their first project was a tripod that would hold a ball of frozen licorice tea. “He wanted to serve it so it could be eaten like a lolli-pop,” Kastner says. Other creations followed, and when Achatz left Trio to start up Alinea in 2004, he convinced Kastner to move to Chicago and work with him full-time.

“I don’t really understand food,” Kastner says, but he and Achatz think that’s an asset—his designs aren’t constrained by tradition. Usually they begin with a specific dish, but other times Kastner will come up with something just because it seems useful. The antenna, for example, is a long steel skewer that runs through a circular base; guests are meant to eat directly off the end. “It bothered me, using a knife and fork with a skewer—it’s really clum-sy,” he says. “This is a logical solution to a problem.” The bow, a thin U-shaped implement strung with a wire across the top, is used to suspend a slice of fish or strip of bacon in the air. The designs may look space-age, but Kastner isn’t just going for the ooh factor. He says the implements allow the chef to “control how food hits the palate.” Because the dish can only be eaten in a specific way, the flavor is maximized. “You could never have this type of control with normal silverware,” he says.

Kastner will manufacture anywhere from 30 to 120 copies of each piece, depending on how quickly Alinea will need to turn them over in a night. They’re built using resilient materials like stainless steel and porcelain, and each batch takes several days to a couple weeks to complete. The major-ity of the work is done in his Wicker Park studio, a former livery stable, and though he’ll occasionally contract some parts out, he always handles the finishing and final assembly himself.

As with dishes on the menu, Achatz eventually retires serving pieces to make room for new con-cepts. Once they’re taken out of cir-culation the pieces are put in storage at the restaurant, though they’re occasionally dusted off for special guests. Achatz has sold a few of the retired pieces when customers have asked, and Kastner has plans to make his creations available to the general pub-lic by the end of the year. They’re currently only available wholesale, at prices ranging from $6 to $15 per piece. “The biggest thing is, they’ve been huge, beyond any expectation,” he says. The most popular item so far is the cork presenter, a set of prongs used to hold a wine cork for inspection. Achatz has sold a few of the cork presenters, and Williams, who often joins him on the road, ready to sell her salts at the wineries they visit. Her fiance, Henry Bishop, a former sommelier at Spiaggia, is currently researching a book about wine. Williams often joins him on the road, ready to sell her salts at the wineries they visit.

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