

Winning Traditions

From the gridiron to the grill, Shula's Steak House upholds a winning tradition.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

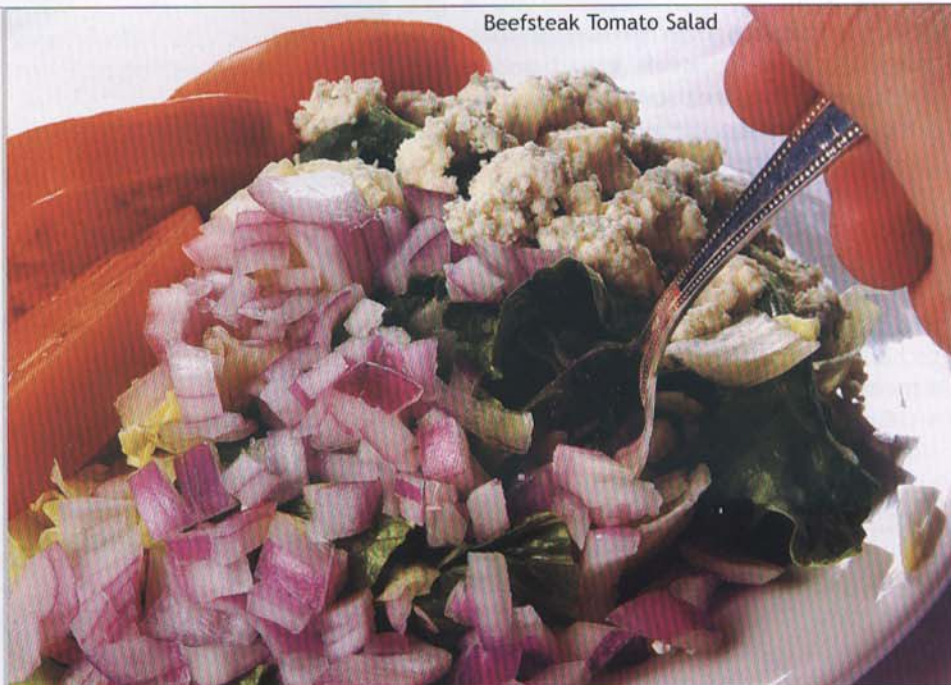
Located in the Wynfrey Hotel in the space formerly occupied by Winston's Steak House, this is the newest location in the Shula's Chain of fine dining steak houses that began as a single restaurant in Miami over a decade ago.

Although Shula's didn't officially celebrate its grand opening until December 3, the staff and management opened for business quietly in early November. However, anticipation of Shula's Steak House's arrival to Birmingham had been building since the announcement was made last summer.

When Mike Shula was named head coach at the University of Alabama in late spring, the Wilson Family, the primary owners of the Winfrey Hotel, decided the time was right to bring Shula's Steak House to Birmingham. After several weeks of talks and planning, word officially came out that Shula's had signed an agreement to open a Shula's Steak House at the Winfrey Hotel on July 30.

"We are looking forward to coming to Alabama," Don Shula said in a written statement at the time. "Alabama is a state rich in football history and tradition."

The Shula's Steak House concept was born in 1989 when restaurateur David Younts along with former Florida governor and U.S. Senator Bob Graham and his brother, real estate developer William A. Graham, talked Don Shula, then the head coach of the Miami Dolphins, to open a high-end steak house in the Florida Lakes community, where the Shula's



Beefsteak Tomato Salad

made their home.

The restaurant, which featured steaks from the Graham Angus Farm in Albany, Georgia, became a hit and, a few years later, the restaurant concept was franchised. Before long, there were six Shula's Steak Houses in Florida and the company began franchising restaurants in other metropolitan cities such as New York, Baltimore and Chicago. The Birmingham location is generally acknowledged to be the first Shula's Steak House in the Southeast that is, of course, not counting Florida.

The growth of Shula's has mimicked the rate of growth in the high-end steak house chain market as a whole over the last 15 years. There are several big players in this market and Shula's has definitely found its niche in that crowd on its way to become

one of the top five steak house chains in North America.

Dave Shula, president of Shula's Steak Houses and son of the legendary coach Don Shula says: "What sets us apart from other steak houses in the industry is that Shula's owns and breeds Angus cattle. We serve only Certified Angus Beef, the best beef money can buy."

Even though to many Birmingham residents the Magic City seemed like a perfect fit for Shula's based on the city's love of football and good food, Shula says he didn't have much knowledge of Birmingham until his brother became the head coach at Alabama. Once the Wilson's contacted them about placing a franchise in Birmingham and the studying began in earnest, Shula said the pieces all fell into place.



Chocolate Soufflé

"As we first started to talk about doing the franchise here and investigating the area and looking at the business climate, residential climate and demographics, I was very impressed with what we found. I don't think a lot of people understand how beautiful of an area Birmingham is," Shula says.

Along with being elegantly decorated, white tablecloth fine dining establishments, each Shula's location is a virtual museum dedicated to the 1972 Miami Dolphins, the only team in NFL history to finish a season undefeated. Inside, diners will find a collection of memorabilia from that historic season—hand painted commemorative footballs, photos of Shula and other members of the undefeated squad, as well as a replica of the NFL Vince Lombardi Trophy awarded to the 17-0 Dolphins.

The football theme is a vital key to the character of Shula's Steak Houses, however, it is not overpower-

ing. While other sports-themed restaurants tend to go overboard, creating a locker-room meets fraternity house impression, the atmosphere at Shula's is more low-key and subtle, but decidedly fine-dining.

Soft lighting, dark wood on the bar, walls and parlor area tables, white tablecloths and dark leather seating make the point perfectly clear that Shula's isn't any sports joint.

"The space turned out terrific. It was a nice blueprint to work with," Shula says. "With the high ceilings and the woodwork and the way they had set up the bar originally with the wine cases separating the lounge and the bar from the dining room it just fit what we look for to work as a footprint."

Part of the allure of places like Shula's is the emphasis on simplicity and the straightforward stance on everything from the décor, the service and the food. Shula's definitely

embraces that approach in its business philosophy, focusing on the best quality steaks the company can possibly get its hands on and very little else. However, the menu is varied enough for almost any palette.

Diners won't find an overwhelming number of choices on the menu at Shula's. Instead, what visitors will find are around a half dozen selections on each part of the menu. The appetizer menu is dominated by fresh shellfish, including items such as oysters Rockefeller, lobster bisque and the barbecued shrimp, perhaps Shula's most popular starter item.

Featuring shrimp, basil and bacon, this appetizer is nothing like the barbecue shrimp found in New Orleans or Creole-style restaurants. For this dish, the kitchen staff starts with four large-scale shrimp that have been stuffed with basil; then each piece is wrapped in bacon. The shrimp is then grilled and topped with a tangy, tomato-based sauce

food reservations



THE DETAILS: *Shula's Steak House*

ADDRESS: 1000 RIVERCHASE GALLERIA,
IN THE WYNFREY HOTEL
PHONE: 444-5750

HOURS: OPEN DAILY FOR DINNER 5:30-
10 P.M.; LOUNGE OPENS AT 5 P.M.

RESERVATIONS ENCOURAGED
TWO PRIVATE DINING AREAS

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more reminiscent of barbecue sauces as we know them in the Southeast. The result is a bold and smoky appetizer that is an ideal beginning to your meal.

The real star attractions at Shula's are, of course, the steaks. There are eight steak choices on the menu at Shula's, all made from certified Angus beef that have been cut and aged to specifications set forth by the company. All of the steaks are generous portions, big enough to satisfy almost any appetite.

The smallest cut on the menu is the Steak Mary Anne, at 10 ounces, an ideal size for ladies or for the adventurous diner who not only wants to sample Shula's steak, but also has a craving for fresh Norwegian salmon or Florida snapper.

The undisputed king of the castle on Shula's steak menu is the mammoth 48-ounce porterhouse, an incredible center-cut steak that has reached legendary status among Shula's regulars. Diners who successfully consume a 48-ounce porterhouse are honored with their name on the company's website and have the chance to purchase a special commemorative football only for members of the 48 Ounce Club. There are currently 23,000 names in the 48 Ounce Club.

Shula's staff treats the steaks with

a reverence reserved only for historical remains or Biblical artifacts. A steak at Shula's is treated as a work of art and painstakingly prepared in a method that takes a little time to cook correctly.

"We don't just slap these steaks on a grill for a few minutes and then bring them out to you," says Shula's of Birmingham executive chef Rick Daidone. "We make sure each steak has time to breathe, allowing the meat's juices to expand back throughout the steak after it's been cooked."


Each steak starts on the grill and is seared for a few minutes then allowed to settle before it is finished off in the oven. Each steak is topped with a small amount of seasoning that includes salt, garlic and a dash of pepper and then served to your table. Since the lighting at Shula's is quite dark, a member of the wait staff shines a small flashlight at the table so diners can see the inside of their steak and ensure that it has been prepared to the correct temperature.

Other steak selections include a 12-ounce center cut filet mignon, a 16-ounce New York strip, 22-ounce bone-in cowboy steak, a 32-ounce prime rib, a 20-ounce Kansas City Strip, and a 24-ounce porterhouse.

Shula's also offers seafood specials, such as steamed or broiled Maine lobster or Australian lobster

flown in fresh daily. Add a side dish such as a double baked potato, hash brown potato or asparagus with hollandaise sauce—all served in family-size portions—and your experience at Shula's is nearly complete. If you still have room and your sweet tooth is calling for attention, there are several desserts to choose from.

Paul Campbell, Shula's Birmingham "head coach," insists the key lime pie is one of the best he's ever tasted. Chocolate lovers can indulge in the molten lava chocolate cake or the chocolate soufflé for two.

Shula's bar area continues the men's club feeling with the dark woods and leather seating and the No-Name Lounge (named in honor of the 1972 Dolphins No-Name Defense) allows visitors the opportunity to catch up on the game one two flat screen televisions while enjoying a cocktail or a glass of wine in this unique and long-awaited restaurant. 



Australian Lobster Tail

Photos: B. Gresham