

food
reservations



Seared Ahi Tuna with a wasabi potato roll and French green beans in a lemongrass curry cream

Change is Good

The city's venerable restaurant has been re-invented as John's City Diner.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

The name John's when referring to Birmingham dining establishments brings a lot of things to mind: flashing neon signs, the hustle and bustle of big-time business, friendly waitresses on a first-name basis with customers, and a history indistinguishable from downtown. Since 1944, John's Restaurant has been at the epicenter of the Magic City's dining scene, serving up fresh seafood, steaks and other specialties—and that famous cole slaw—to hungry diners during everything from important business negotiations to nights on the town.

Recent years had not been kind to John's Restaurant, however, as the city's dining scene began its flight to the suburbs and the restaurant began a slow decline in terms of quality and customers. Without help, John's was destined to become another empty shell, serving as nothing but a symbolic reminder of what once was. Fortunately for Birmingham, one enterprising entrepreneur is determined to bring glory back to John's while ensuring a bright future for this local landmark.

Restaurateur and Birmingham native Shannon Gober and his wife Shana, along with investment backing from his father, purchased John's Restaurant outright in the spring of 2004 and immediately began planning to refurbish the space from a faded artifact into a vibrant city diner. Rechristened John's City Diner, the new restaurant opened a year ago this April and the buzz surrounding the diner has been considerable. Even though the name and the space have been saved, the resurrection didn't come without some changes, some drastic, others not so.

While the layout and table arrangement has not changed, gone are the sea-foam blue walls, stuffed fish hangings and sterile lighting. In their place are a fresh coat of neutral paint, land-

scape-size photos of downtown scenes shot by Gober's sister and modern, elegant lighting. The booths, back counter and coat racks all remain, although they have been cleaned up and reupholstered, resulting in a dining room that gives a nod and wink to Birmingham's past, rather than living in it.

"We didn't want to do anything here that would damage the name and what it had meant to the people of Birmingham for 60 years," Gober says. "We could have come in here, changed everything around and put the name Shannon's on the door, but most people would say 'I've heard of that place. It's where John's used to be.'"

John's City Diner is in a peculiar position that other restaurants aren't. While downtown continues to be revitalized by new restaurants offering experimental cuisine in sleek and modern spaces, the name John's carries its own set of special baggage. To utter the name John's in certain company brings up vivid memories in many people who have dined there for decades. To tamper too much with the restaurant or to the John's name, says Gober, would cause a backlash.

Retaining the status quo wasn't

an option either. Simply put, John's Restaurant was having serious trouble competing in the current scene. The restaurant's menu was outdated and in crucial need of a makeover. Under the John's City Diner moniker, most of the old menu has been replaced with new items with an emphasis on fresh seafood and locally-grown produce. However, as executive chef Paul Clark says, attention had to be paid to the restaurant's history.

"It's a tight-rope walk that we make every day. Even now we battle occasionally over fried snapper throats, even though they haven't been on the menu since something like 1978,"



Pan seared Halibut with jumbo lump crabmeat in a lemon beurre blanc with a crispy, herbed potato cake

Photos: B. Gustafson

THE DETAILS ON

john's city diner

LUNCH

11:00 - 3:30 Mon. - Fri.

DINNER

5:00 - 9:00 Mon. - Thurs.

5:00 - 10:00 Fri. & Sat.

LOCATION

122 Richard Arrington Jr.
Blvd. N.

PHONE

322-6014

Reservations not required.



says Clark.

"We knew we had to make some changes to the menu, but the discussion was what to leave on the menu and what to leave off," Clark adds. "In the end, we knew we couldn't touch the cole slaw or the corn sticks."

And those corn sticks are still served two at a time with a pat of butter soon after you're seated. Other items still hanging around include the meat loaf and trout amandine, two long-time favorites among regular John's diners.

Clark and his staff have created a menu that is at once inventive but accessible as well and meant to appeal to every diner's comfort level.

For instance, Clark has developed a hydroponic lettuce salad that is a perfect start to a meal at John's City Diner. Clark begins with a collection of three luttuces grown in a hydroponic farm in Gadsden and tosses them with a hearty vinaigrette of sage, thyme and other herbs. Then he adds crumbled bleu cheese, large portabello mushrooms, slivered almonds, roasted red pepper and artichoke hearts. The result is an earthy salad that doesn't work too hard to impress, rather, it tends to hit you midway through just how good and flavorful it is.

The rest of the menu reflects the eclectic downtown diner feel Gober wants John's City Diner to project. You'll find everything from a two-fisted cheeseburger—popular with Birmingham School of Law students grabbing a bite to eat before classes—a half-pound black angus burger marinated in a mixture of more than 15 spices and topped with cheddar

cheese; to grilled center-cut pork chops served over smashed potatoes; to crispy roasted duck.

But, the real specialty of John's is its seafood. Always a mainstay at John's in the old days, the focus on fresh fish is still on display at John's City Diner. Seafood selections such as the pan seared Idaho trout, beer battered gulf shrimp and Shana's crab cakes—lump crab cakes with red and green bell peppers, onions, creole mustard and bread crumbs topped with roasted red pepper sauce—are all regulars on the menu.

Other seafood specialties pop on the menu from time to time as well and are certainly worth checking out, for instance: the blackened mahi. Following the traditional method developed by famed New Orleans chef Paul Prudhomme, the fish is cooked in an extremely hot cast iron skillet after it has been rubbed with a special mix of Cajun spices. For lunch, diners can choose two sides from a list of 12, including fried okra, buttered sweet potatoes, fried green tomatoes and macaroni and cheese.

For dinner, however, Clark typically serves the mahi alongside a generous helping of grilled asparagus and Cajun-inspired roasted corn grits. For long-time John's fans, rest assured, the bar is in the same place as it's always been and is a great spot to mingle after work for a mixed drink or a glass of wine. Gober changes the offerings on the wine list reg-

ularly, so check with your server to see what is featured during your next visit. At the time of this writing, John's City Diner was featuring several wines from Chile, including Vina Morande, a reserve chardonnay with a hint of tropical fruit that is a nice balance to the spiciness of the blackened mahi.

For dessert, John's City Diner has a selection of pies and cakes made by local baker Jennifer Heerton. Lemon ice box pie, praline pecan cheesecake and Charlie Murphy's chocolate cake are all regular items.

With almost a year under their belts, the staff at John's City Diner have created a comfortable dining atmosphere with a variety of offerings for every taste. Let's hope the next 60 years are as good to John's as the last. ☞

Homemade vanilla pound cake

