

Observer

Dunston's: Dallas' Awesomely Old-School Steakhouse

BY SCOTT REITZ

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The bone-in ribeye. No credit check required.

Kathy Tran

There are many steakhouses in Dallas -- places where you can order a thick cut of beef with potatoes gratin and spinach as a side, and places that serve plenty of overpriced bottles of red wine. You can treat yourself to a cold shrimp cocktail or freshly shucked oysters to start at scores of steakhouses in Dallas, and choose from plenty of decadent sweets to glaze yourself with long after you should have called it quits. There are plenty of steakhouses that boast a valet service, too. But the ones that tout a self-service salad bar complete with bacon bits and

wooden bowls -- those are firmly in the margin. The dark, beautiful, smoke-stained margin.

Walking through the front door of Dunston's on Lovers Lane is like stepping through a tear in the yellowed fabric of time. Outside, Pathfinders, Civics and other modern cars fill the parking lot, pointing at something close to present day happenings. But just paces away, walnut-stained wood paneling and drop ceiling tiles frame a restaurant that hasn't been updated since the Ford Pinto was America's best selling ride. Nixon was president the last time this dining room with burgundy patterned carpet got a facelift, and if you're wearing a burgundy jacket you can blend in perfectly with the tufted pleather booths in the main dining room.

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Dunston's first opened as Gene's in 1955 -- a time when steakhouses operated more like family restaurants and you could get a bacon-wrapped filet for \$1.75. Gene Dunston, now 83 and still working regularly, eventually changed the name to his family's. He's opened and closed as many as nine locations since, but there are just two now. And while the original restaurant near Love Field on Harry Hines Boulevard has a loyal following, it was rebuilt in the '90s and lost some of its kitsch. It's the Lovers Lane location that has all the throwback charm -- so thick it's started to attract nostalgia-addicted hipsters.

On a recent Friday night, it's packed with a mix of silver-hairs coming as long as Dunston's has been opened, families with children and younger diners who either think they have stumbled upon a really accurate period restaurant, with every dusty detail nailed down flat, or who have been eating at Dunston's their entire lives. French fries and Saltine crumbs fall to the floor around high chairs, and a bottle of A-1 can be spotted on a table in the corner. It's a vestige of simpler times, and a stark contrast to what you'll see in its modern counterparts.

Chad Dunston, Gene's son and a manager at the restaurants, says the steakhouse invasion started when the Palm, an import from New York City, opened downtown. Over the course of a decade, steakhouses grew to become power restaurants packed with massive dry-aged cuts priced at more than \$100 each. Wine lists ballooned until a customer could spend more than his mortgage payment on a bottle of cabernet, and then the restaurant paradigm that was built on meat and a baked potato went so far as to offer a caviar bar. The steakhouse had become synonymous with deep pockets and its more pedestrian predecessor was largely

seems by now, much like deep pockets, and its more pedestrian predecessor has largely incinerated from our memories. The high chairs were used for kindling.

The Dunston family didn't get the memo -- or, more likely, got it and blew it off. They offer cuts of beef, in prime and choice grades, alongside pork chops and fish, all of them cooked over a hickory-fired wood pit you smell as soon as you walk in the door. It's a scent that captures all of your childhood campfires and wraps them up in the smell of your uncle Charlie's basement. Dunston's is a feast for all your senses, but you should know to not expect three-star dining when you open your menu.

This is not the place you come for a steak cooked exactly how you requested. A strip steak ordered medium rare arrived closer to medium well one night. On another evening, when two steaks were ordered rare to compensate, the strip arrived pink while the rib-eye was so unscathed by heat the red flesh jiggled when the plate hit the table. Why the servers ask how you want your pork chop cooked is a mystery; they're so thin they can only be cooked well done. It's as if the servers are using their tickets to stoke the fire.

You'll have much more control at the salad bar, where my date faithfully re-created the same salad she'd made countless times as a kid: iceberg lettuce, plenty of sliced carrots, a single piece of broccoli and three cherry tomatoes, all drenched in half a cup of ranch. If you patronize restaurants like Del Frisco's and Knife, this is a recipe you've likely not executed for a long time, but if you can get on board, you'll end up with an experience that reminds you of a time when you didn't have to check your credit card balance before going out to order a rib eye.

Chad Dunston says not a week goes by that a customer begs him to not change a thing in the restaurant. And for better and worse, that's exactly what his family has done, because it's that sense of nostalgia that keeps regular customers coming back week after week. They come for the grilled chicken served with a baked potato, and they come for that bacon-wrapped filet that's been on the menu from the very beginning. (It will set you back \$14.95 these days.) They come for the Key lime pie dyed a shade of sea green, and they come for the daily cobbler that's offered in blueberry and peach.

Many of the customers are dining at Dunston's simply because they've been dining at Dunston's for as long as they remember. The regulars get table reservations marked with their names hand-scrawled in plastic placards. They know the best seats in the house are the art deco captains chairs and black leather booths in the back bar. But they've been here so long

they can't see the history as clearly as a newcomer. Walk through the front door for the first time and the throw-back appeal smacks you just as firmly as the smell of smoldering mesquite.

It works so well because the charm is authentic. "What we are is not by intention, we're just maintaining something," Chad says, describing what amounts to a restaurant museum, or that time capsule you taped shut in elementary school. Only in this time capsule, there is no wistfulness or sadness, only happiness, and fullness, and whatever that feeling is when you walk back to the salad bar for one more glob of ranch and don't look back.

Dunston's 5423 W. Lovers Lane, 214-352-8320, dunstonssteakhouse.com, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday, 4 p.m.-11 p.m. Saturday, 4 p.m.-10 p.m. Sunday, \$\$

Bacon-wrapped filet \$14.95 *Shrimp cocktail* \$8.95 *New York strip* \$13.95 *Salad bar* \$7.95 *Cobbler of the day* \$3.50

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