Places That Are Gone

Remembering Little Tavern Restaurants, D.C.'s Greasiest Greasy Spoons

By Dave Nuttycombe
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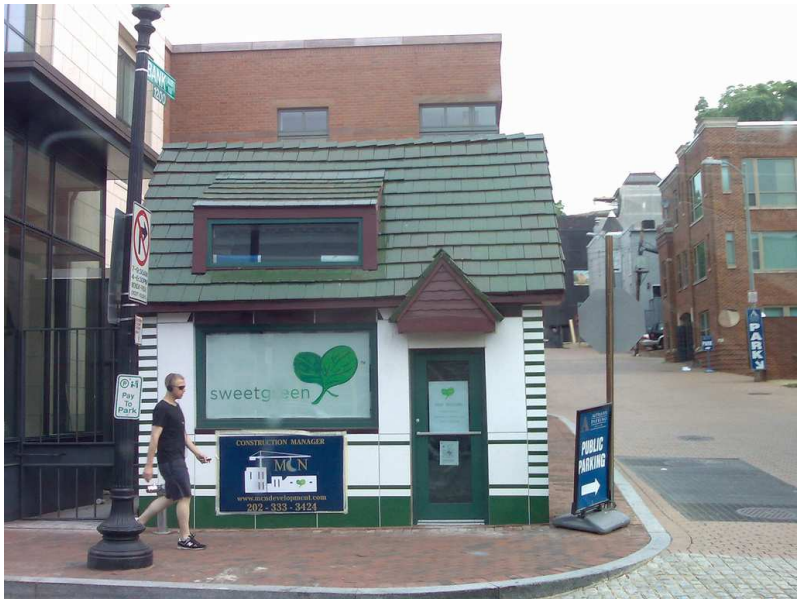
Club LT. The LT Lounge. Deathballs.

In 1928, Little Taverns began springing up on the Washington landscape like pimples at a Lisa Loeb concert. With their steep-pitched, green-tiled roofs, the restaurants resembled miniature Swiss chalets—or very large cuckoo clocks. Inside, a greasy grill and maybe a dozen stools invited customers to partake of a menu that was Henry Ford basic: any food you want as long as it's a hamburger. By the mid-'40s, there were 50 Little Taverns, and Arthur Godfrey pitched their charms on the radio.



Today, D.C. diners in search of a high-fat diet have exactly one choice: The last tavern sits on a sloping lot in the "Wheaton Triangle," down the street from Chuck Levin's music store, across from Wheaton Plaza. (For the serious commuting gourmet, two LTs remain in Baltimore, and one inLaurel.)

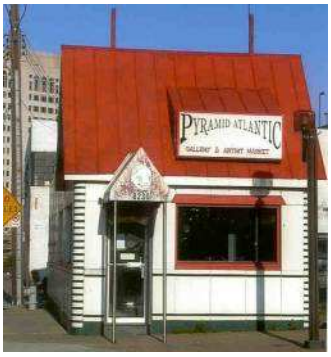
Little Tavern was founded by Harry F. Duncan, who spent more than 60 of his 93 years in the Washington metro area. Duncan claimed that his was the nation's second-oldest chain, after White Castle. (He also claimed to have invented the cheeseburger, in Louisville, Ky., during the '20s. He died in 1992, so we can't grill him for specifics.)

The burger baron had a gift for clever marketing. His slogan, "Buy 'em by the bag," was not a desperate threat, it was an exclamation of value. At a mere nickel a burger, a bagful of 20 Little Tavern patties could be had for a buck. Two bits got you a meal of three sandwiches and a cup o' Joe. (And McDonald's used to hype "change back from your dollar"!) My family's picnics sometimes began with a stop at Club LT for a couple bags to go. This was, I hasten to point out, considered a treat and not child abuse.

And what burgers they are! The “famous” Little Tavern hamburger is about one-fourth the size of the average modern patty, barely larger than the paper-thin slice of pickle sitting on it. The grayish-looking meat is hand-packed, with chopped onions smushed in, and rolled into a ball to be set on the griddle. Flame, grease that cooked 1,000 other burgers, and a square little bun transform it into the affectionately christened “deathball.”

But the real secret of the LT burger is storage. No heat lamps for the Little Tavern: Burgers are kept under a damp towel in deep drawers beneath the grill. Opening this meat humidifier releases an aromatic cloud of steam. Your order, warm and slightly moist, comes served on a tidy square of wax paper.

Condiment options are three: catsup, mustard, or a concoction of both—the latter generously squirted out of its own dispenser in a murky, bilious orange blend. Is it mutsup? Castard? Whatever—it's the only way to eat a deathball.



Open 24 hours a day, LT used to be a night light for night owls. While the shops drew their share of ne'er-do-wells, deathballs probably saved as many lives as they ended. For hearty-partiers wobbling back to bed, a quick stop at LT was an effectively sobering experience.

But the good things in life never last. By the '70s, stagflation had rendered the bag o' beef concept impractical, and “large”—i.e., regular-size burgers—had been added. When the century and he had reached their early 80s, Duncan decided to concentrate on other businesses in retirement-friendly Florida. In 1981, he sold the 30-unit LT chain to GEW Inc., headed by lawyer Gerald Wedren. The barrister had big plans. A “dress code” was established. Over the institutional white shirt—so effective at showcasing grease stains and sweat—slipped a green, logo-imprinted, hardware-clerk-style apron. The staff also wore matching paper army-style garrison caps.

Other “improvements” included broadening the menu to include fries (never a culinary success) and a steak 'n' cheese sub, and adding lettuce and tomato to the topping options. The “buy 'em by the bag” motto was resuscitated, but now the Tavern bag held only three burgers, and several dollars had to change hands.

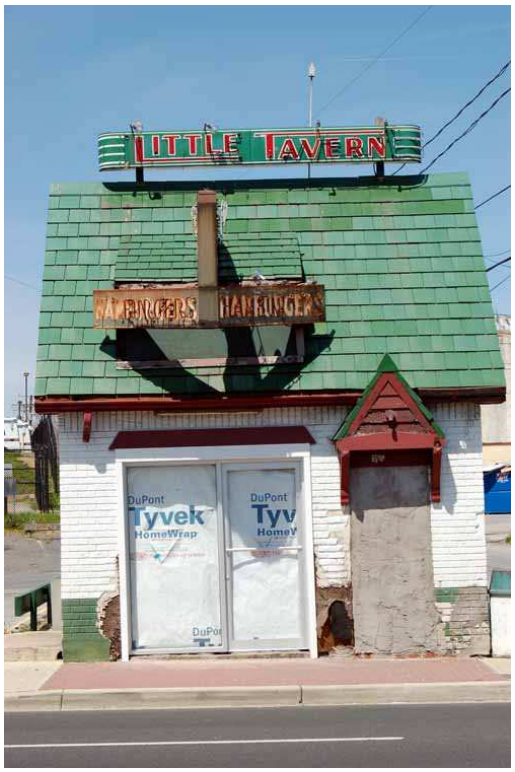
Most misguidedly, the new management tried to get swanky. In 1987, they appropriated the “Club LT” nickname for a faux diner at The Shops at National Place. A more un-LT-like place would be hard to imagine. This sop to respectability predictably lured the Washington Post's Phyllis Richman, who, in a March 1988 Weekend review, bemoaned the new diner's burgers: “They miss the old LT's minced onions and pickle slices which add a flavor punch.” “Sucker punch” would have been more precise.

Wedren threw in the spatula four months later. Atlantic Restaurant Ventures Inc. (ARV), a Clinton, Md.-based firm that also held the local Fuddruckers franchise, acquired the

chain, which had shrunk to only 22 units. Profits fell, and in 1990, ARV sold the now-20-unit chain to ARV co-founder and former President Roger Kisiel for $1.6 million.

That wasn't the end of the deal. In November 1991, ARV sued GEW for fraud, charging that Little Tavern's worth had been misrepresented. In filing the lawsuit, it came to light that Wedren had a silent partner: Sen. Howard Metzenbaum (D-Ohio). A teeny tempest swirled around the upscale, consumer-crusader Metzenbaum's involvement in such a downscale endeavor, but the grease failed to stick. The case never went to court.

The Kisiel era continued, and so did the downward trend. By 1992, landlords were foreclosing on Little Taverns all over town. Before the wrecking balls arrived, Al Wroy, who had joined the Tavern team under Wedren, stepped in and renegotiated with landlords and vendors. In December of that year, Wroy took responsibility for the chain.



Wroy oversees his four-Tavern empire from his Bel Air, Md., bedroom. “You don't need a fancy office when you have to paint stores, buy new ice machines,” he notes. “Every penny goes back into the business.”

Wroy is currently negotiating for a fifth store, and his business plan calls for 15 new taverns to open over the next 10 years. None in the District, however. “The District is too hard to run a business in. Too many laws, too many fees, too difficult for a small business to make a profit,” he says, adding, “Nothing against the public there, of course.”

Perhaps Wroy can restore Club LT to its former “glory.” Perhaps not. When even McDonald's is offering carrot sticks, and a Twinkie can claim to be “low-fat,” the greasy spoon seems doomed.

The (near) death of the deathball also speaks to the bottom-line business chic of the late 20th century. Little Tavern began with a visionary entrepreneur—“Plop some cheese on that sucker!”—who built a successful enterprise with sweat equity. Duncan shepherded his modest shops for more than half a century, but once he was gone, it was less than a decade before his legacy was, too. (A sad commentary: Placing a call to the Silver Spring Boys Club that Duncan founded—a building that still carries his name in 10-inch-tall letters—yielded the response, “Never heard of him.”) Duncan's chain had become a mere “investment opportunity.”

After taking control of LT in '88, Fuddruckee Kisiel was quoted in the Post thusly: “We can impart to the Little Taverns a knowledge of the hamburger business that hasn't been imparted heretofore.”

As these pictures warn, knowledge is not to be confused with smarts. And a hamburger is sometimes more than just a hamburger.

FOLLOW THAT STORY

Death for the Deathball?

The area's last Little Tavern may not make it to the millennium.
By Dave Nuttycombe
(*Reprinted from Washington City Paper*)

The sign reads "Lease or Build to Suit." No big deal on a fast-changing corner in suburban Maryland. Unless, that is, you like your burgers greasy, cheesy, and little. That's because this ominous notice of real estate transition hangs from the last Little Tavern near D.C., an outpost on busy Viers Mill Road in Wheaton. Has the eatery that has stood for decades along the suburb's original commercial district slung its last greaseball?

Inside, Tony the cook dismisses the huge banner with a laconic "Just negotiating the lease, just scare tactics." His full attention is turned to starting a run of the large-sized burgers. But if you turn your gaze past Tony and out the window, you'll see that what until very recently was a half-block of low-rent office buildings is now rubble -- bulldozed, the cook says, to extend a parking lot. The rubble heralds a future much friendlier to T.G.I. Friday's than to the venerable local burger joint.

Up and down Viers Mill Road and Georgia Avenue, the 'burb that was once described as "a funky ethnic enclave" is in danger of defunkifying. Wheaton Plaza is planning an expansive "revitalization." Not long ago, a bright new car dealership went up across from the aging Little Tavern, which still boasts a Ms. Pac-Man in one corner and a Street Fighter II machine by the door.

Defunkification is also a pretty good way to describe what's happened to the rest of the region's string of Little Taverns. What had once been a mighty chain of more than 50 locations had dwindled to fewer than five when former Tavern employee Al Wroy bought the business in 1992 ("Places That Are Gone," 11/10/95). Although a new tavern opened in Ocean City this summer, and there are two shops remaining in Baltimore and one in Laurel, the Wheaton shop is the last option for most D.C. epicureans in search of distinctive dining.

Wroy won't say much about the sign that obstructs half of his view. "That's just standard," he says. "They will put a sign up on your building to force you to come to the table on their terms. It's just a standard thing that landlords do."

But he won't comment further about his last local franchise's future. "When you're in negotiations, you don't say anything about it," Wroy explains softly over the phone. "I don't own the property, the landlady has sold the property, and the new owners...I feel they have other plans for the property, but I really can't tell you what. They always try to make you feel like they have other tenants for the property."

"I wish I could answer you more," says the understanding Wroy. The landlord's real estate agent did not return a phone call by press time.

Sitting at the Wheaton restaurant's empty counter, manager Cynthia Johnson Brown isn't talking about Little Tavern's birth way back in 1928, or about how Arthur Godfrey used to pitch its burgers on the radio, or about the "Buy 'Em by the Bag" slogan that was the chain's claim to fame.

Maybe that's because Brown is spending a weekend afternoon watching cars drive up and down the hill outside, toward Rockville or Silver Spring -- or to the Shoney's up the block. Shoney's just went 24-hour, adding competition in what had been Little Tavern's exclusive niche. "To make a long story short, we would like for more people to come visit us," says Brown. "I'm trying to save a part of our history. I need all the customers I can get my hands on. And then some."

With Godfrey's ads long gone from the airwaves, Brown appears to be Little Tavern's only weapon against an endless stream of competing burger advertisements. This afternoon, she's giving Ronald McDonald and Dave Thomas a run for their PR money.

"It's still a family place," Brown announces. "I get a lot of couples, this is where they met. Right here in this Tavern. There's this one man -- I don't know his name, but I know him by face. And he said he remembered when they built this. And he's like 86, 87 years old. He comes in, gets two burgers, nothing but onions only. Last time I saw him was last year -- I thought he might have expired. But he came in last week. And I was really glad to see him. I was really glad to see him. He said he was under the weather and all that. But he came in, 'Got to have my two -- onions!' He said, 'You still here?' I said, 'You still here?'"

"And then this one man who had had open-heart surgery..." Brown adds. "Believe it or not, this is where his wife had brought him, because he really had a taste for it. She said, 'If that's what it takes...' and he came twice. And that made me feel good, so I made him a little something special. I threw in a few extra burgers. He don't get out of the car, but he's like this -- thumbs up! -- so everybody was happy."

Brown agrees with me that Little Tavern hamburgers are the best in the world.

"Yes they are. Yes, they are. You can't beat 'em. You cannot really beat 'em. And one thing, over 30 years and still -- fresh meat. Our meat is not frozen. You're getting fresh meat. We're giving you the best service we can. We hand-roll our patties, our balls. We're still the old-fashioned way."

The old-fashioned way is quickly becoming older-fashioned: Soon we will be referring to recent events as occurring "in the last century." But perhaps history can save the Wheaton Little Tavern. Brown suggests that her shop has been submitted for landmark status. But a call to Gwen Wright, historic preservation coordinator for Montgomery County, proves this statement wrong.

"The Wheaton Little Tavern has never been evaluated for historic preservation status," says Wright. Four Tavern structures in the county were looked at in the early '90s. The Bethesda location, now a Chinese carryout, got the nod.

"My sense is -- although I don't really know this -- my sense is that the County Council that designates, that makes the final decision, it was a little bit of a leap of faith for them to designate the Little Tavern, so they said, 'We'll do one,' and it was the one in Bethesda," says Wright, adding, "The one in Wheaton was never brought up."

A glance at the Montgomery County Code suggests that the last Little Tavern might be a shoo-in if anyone were to nominate it. The code has nine criteria for determining a structure or area to be historic. Among them is whether the site "is identified with a person or a group of persons who influenced society." Of course, Little Tavern is the country's second-oldest restaurant chain, after White Castle. Founder Harry F. Duncan once claimed to have invented the cheeseburger. Consider the history of America without the cheeseburger.

Another criterion is whether the building "embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction." The application for the Bethesda Little Tavern, built in 1939, makes much of the "symbolic nature of the design," noting that "all of the Little Tavern Shops were built in a style reminiscent of an Old English tavern as a way of conveying a pleasant, familiar environment. However, in order to evoke the notions of speed and efficiency associated with fast, inexpensive meals, the design utilized the newer technology and materials of the 'moderne' era -- neon lighting, tile, formica, metal alloys, and vitrolite."

Do Starbucks use vitrolite?

And according to the regulations, a site may become historic if it "represents the work of a master" [pass] or "possesses high artistic values" [pass]. Also, if it "represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community, or county due to its singular physical characteristics or landscape."

Well, Wheaton without Little Tavern would be like D.C. without baseball or congressional representation. Or, er, uh...

Anyone may nominate the Tavern for landmark status, says Wright. "That would mean filling out the appropriate forms and submitting them to the county. And certainly that could happen. I think I had a call last week from someone with historic preservation in Silver Spring, asking about the process regarding the Wheaton Little Tavern."

"But just because it's designated doesn't mean that it will stay a Little Tavern," Wright warns. "Historic designation does not control use -- it just controls the facade. Historic designation cannot force a landlord to grant the existing current Little Tavern a lease. It could be designated historic and still become a Chinese restaurant."

Coincidentally, the day after speaking with Brown, I run into Montgomery County Executive Douglas Duncan at one of those typical MoCo dedication ceremonies. I ambush him with questions about the Little Tavern, pointing out that Silver Spring's Tastee Diner was saved from the wrecking ball. There is a proud county history of supporting good bad food.

Duncan -- no relation to the chain's founder -- chuckles and says he'll look into it.

Back in Wheaton, Brown smiles and shakes her head. "For all the old customers, or the ones who don't believe we still exist, we're here, we're here -- 11143 Viers Mill Road. Please come and visit. Please come and visit."

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