

Restaurant city

Is there always room for one more, or has Birmingham had enough?

By MARY CONNELLY-SZCZESNY

San Francisco has its bay. New York City has its Empire State Building. And Birmingham has its restaurants.

Restaurants? you ask.

Since 1972, when Birmingham voters agreed to sales of liquor by the glass, restaurant trade has burgeoned.

Seven years later, there are nearly three dozen eateries within walking distance of one another in the city's downtown area. You can satisfy your appetite with anything from a coney island or Chinese egg roll to chateaubriand or quiche.

But are there enough hungry stomachs to fill many more eating spots in the center of the city?

"Can the city use more restaurants? I don't think it can," said John Kales, owner of the Lemon Peel, 575 Hunter.

"If too many people open up, some people won't survive and if someone closes it gives the area a bad reputation.

"I think the city should be very, very careful. You only have X amount of dollars to distribute." "I really don't know how many more restaurants it can support," said Herbert Schmid, who is opening a restaurant in the former Detroit Edison building, 220 Merrill in August.

"Whether it's reached the saturation point or not I don't know and no one will until we open and other restaurants under construction open.

"Maybe we will become a restaurant city and people will come in to visit various restaurants."

YVONNE GILL-DAVIS, owner of Tweeny's, 280 N. Woodward, also theorized that cultivating the image of a city of restaurants may breed more business.

"If you can get people in the habit of coming to Birmingham for restaurants, it can't hurt us," she said. "The more restaurants in the area, the more people will be drawn to the area. Then it's up to you to capture a section of the market."

"I think it's great," said Bill VanHorn, co-owner of P.J. Clark's in the Continental Market.

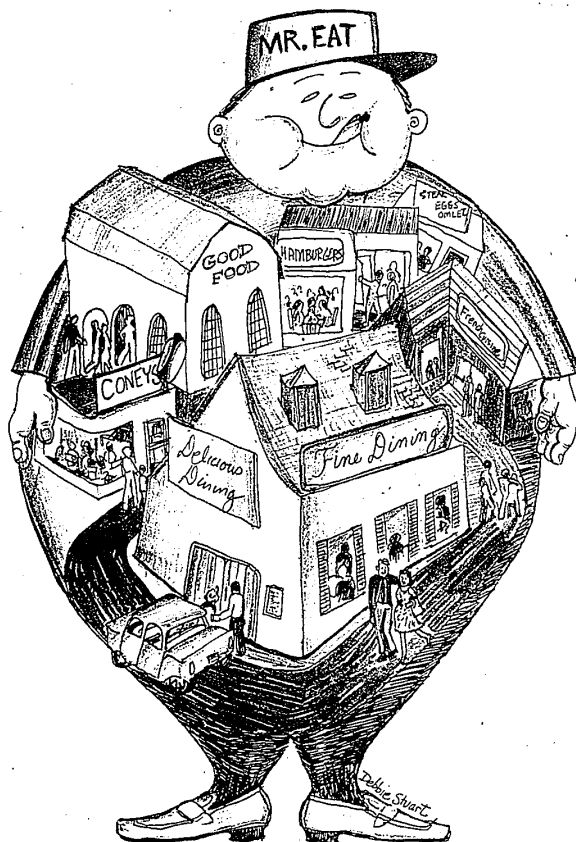
"Others in the business think 'Oh my God another restaurant' but I wish the whole strip was restaurants. We'd pull people from the tri-county area."

"There's a limit to them but who knows? They all seem to be busy," said Jim Peabody, owner of Peabody's, 154 S. Hunter.

"Some restaurants seat 40 people and another guy will seat 240. This is what you have to consider," said Graham Clements, owner of Birmingham Bowl, 1000 Webster. "I don't think at this point the city is saturated." While in other cities, such as Southfield, a sizeable number of restaurants thrive, Birmingham's restaurant strip is concentrated in a radius of several blocks.

"It's kind of like going to Rush Street in Chicago or Chinatown in San Francisco," Clements said. "You can park your car and walk from one to another."

THERE IS, in one restaurateur's view, a major and minor league among Birmingham restaurants. The major league contenders are



"Mr. Eat" offers lots of choices for Birmingham restaurant frequenters who can choose to go casual or eat in style.

nine restaurants with a license to serve beer, wine and liquor by the glass.

These range from the Birmingham Bowl, 1000 Webster, which serves a drink against the backdrop of a bowling alley, to the casual wood-hewn ambience of Peabody's, 154 S. Hunter, to the sophisticated and trendy Tweeny's, in the Great American Insurance Building.

The eating spots without liquor include specialty sandwich shops such as Olga's or Koopies, Chinese restaurants such as Pearl's and full-service lunch and dinner restaurants such as P.J. Clark's in the Continental Market and

the planned Joseph's at Woodward and Bowers.

To some, how many more restaurants Birmingham can support depends on what type of eateries or dining room opens.

"THERE'S A LOT more room for a lot more sensibly priced restaurants," said Clements.

"I definitely think there's room for that price bracket where the working man in Birmingham can take his wife to a place with a friendly atmosphere and doesn't have to spend an arm and a leg."

"It would be nice to see more variety," said Ms. Gill-Davis. "Not haute cuisine necessarily but maybe a late night bistro, a great breakfast place or even a great hamburger place."

"To all grab the same market is maybe making a mistake."

Some of the factors which spawned the restaurant city image initially are expected to continue to draw restaurateurs to Birmingham.

Some of those doing business here point to the city's image, its close-fisted liquor license policy and its downtown as boons to the restaurant trade and factors which keep a sizeable number of restaurants flourishing.

"Birmingham is centrally located to a lot of things. And downtown is still good in Birmingham. That helps," said Peabody. "You have a lot of walking traffic still in Birmingham — even at nighttime."

"There are enough dollars now to go around and people will come in from outside Birmingham," said Clements. "Birmingham is a nice place to say you're going to."

"You don't just pull from Birmingham," agreed Frank Joseph, expected to open Joseph's by September. "People from Farmington, West Bloomfield and Southfield want to shop here and eat here."

ANOTHER RESTAURATEUR also venturing into the Birmingham market said that take over of the Birmingham Theatre's management by Nederlander Theatrical Enterprises and the drawing power of live stage productions is a boon to restaurants.

"I think the Nederlanders taking over the theater is going to be a boost," said Schmid, who is opening a restaurant at 220 Merrill.

"They have the ability to fill the theater every evening and that will be a big factor."

Some restaurateurs think their success or failure in Birmingham's competitive market rides on how the city handles liquor licenses.

Kales of the Lemon Peel maintained that the city's tight-fisted policy helps ensure a restaurateur's investment.

"The city is protecting restaurant owners with liquor licenses. They're not letting everyone have one," Kales said. "Other cities are not doing that."

But VanHorn, co-owner of P.J. Clark's, which is suing the city to obtain a license, claimed restaurants "need to be treated equally" to ensure survival of the restaurant district.

"If everyone can be treated equally, I think there's room for all of us," VanHorn said. "But for us to survive we have to be able to serve beer or wine or liquor because people like Schmid will be 50 feet away from us serving it."

BIRMINGHAM STILL has seven unallocated liquor licenses. But Mayor Bert Jackson indicated city officials do not want to just add timber to the competitive restaurant fire and are not likely to allocate another license unless it is a special circumstance.

In the meantime, restaurant-goers can choose their mood and satisfy their appetites in a surrounding of dark wood and wing-back chairs at Archibald's, light wood and cane-back chairs at the Midtown Cafe, stained glass and red leather at Machus Sly Fox or any other setting offered in the Birmingham restaurant mecca.

INTERMISSION

Intermission

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Zip _____

Mail to: Intermission, The Observer & Eccentric, 1225 Bowers, Birmingham 48012

Four weeks ago we asked readers to respond to the following question:

WHEN DINING OUT, DO YOU AUTOMATICALLY TIP A CERTAIN PERCENTAGE OF THE BILL, OR BASE THE TIP ON THE QUALITY OF SERVICE RECEIVED? DO YOU FEEL FORCED INTO TIPPING AT LEAST A PERCENT REGARDLESS OF THE QUALITY OF SERVICE?

Here are two of the responses we received. Both arrived in the mail too late for the Thursday, July 5, edition.

Theresa Edwards of Birmingham wrote: "I feel most times waitresses have had poor training or none. This can be altered by entering the Culinary Art Program at Oakland Community College, Orchard Ridge campus. They will train you and you will be given on the job training. See it to believe it. P.S. I tip fairly, 15 percent. It helps."

Mary Pryor of Troy wrote: "I eat lunch out almost every day. My friend and I eat out in the evening at least

twice a week and he entertains many evenings with dinner at "good" places. I, and he, resent gratuities tacked on our bills. If service is good we tip a lot, if poor very little and if bad, even less."

The current Intermission question is: HAS THIS SUMMER'S GASOLINE SITUATION CAUSED ANY CHANGES IN YOUR ENTERTAINMENT PLANS? DO YOU GO OUT LESS FREQUENTLY, SHARE DRIVING WITH OTHERS, AND/ OR SEEK OUT ENTERTAINMENT CLOSE TO HOME?

What is your opinion? Write your answer, clip the coupon, and mail it to the Intermission column.

Use additional paper if you want to send a more complete response. Letters may be edited, if space limitations require it.

Letters selected from those submitted will appear in next Thursday's edition. Please send your response in the next few days.

Live Kiss at Pontiac's Silverdome

By ERIC MOBEY

When I accepted the assignment of reviewing the Kiss/Cheap Trick concert, I did so with the understanding that my story would have to be of a feature nature rather than any serious attempt to critique the music of Kiss. I by no means possess a love for the heavy metal sound of Kiss. Therefore, I knew any review of the group would be a bogus attempt at objective journalism.

I decided to do a little homework on the group by talking to several people about what they think of Kiss. I began my survey with the kids who sport the Kiss T-shirts and plaster their grade-school lockers with Kiss decals and bubble gum cards.

The 9 and 10-year-olds get very graphic. They describe Gene Simmons' routine of spitting up fake blood in great detail. They're very quick to tell.

(Continued on page 5D)