

At 80, he's 'bean' around restaurants a long time



Mike Pavis had no idea his chain of affordable Mexican restaurants would be so popular when he opened them in Chico in 1955. At the age of 80, Pavis continues to work at the Chico eatery seven days a week. “I should have retired, but now it’s too late. I’m too old to retire now,” he said.

By Catherine Aaron
Staff Writer

The patriarch of a small chain of area restaurants still meets customers at the door every day, ready with a basket of chips and cup of salsa and friendly greeting for the kids.

He started out in Chico’s restaurant scene nearly 40 years ago, selling hamburgers for 19 cents, before venturing out in his own business.

At the age of 17, he got his first job as a “soda jerk” at an old-fashioned soda fountain in San Francisco.

“I stayed with the jobs with the public, in restaurants. I tried many other trades – driving a truck, construction, -- but always came back to restaurant work.”

Pavis worked for many years at The Tunnel Creamery in San Francisco before serving four years with the U.S. Navy until the end of World War II as an electrician. Upon return, he got involved in a restaurant venture in the Palo Alto area.

Pavis remembers the Bay Area being “so beautiful during the 1930s and ‘40s, and it’s hard to bring back the past. It was so different than it is today. We made ice cream in the windows for everyone to watch, and delivered it. The supermarkets killed all that. We didn’t have self-service then.”

Pavis makes schmoozing with the customers, and knowing many of them by name, a big part of his job. “Of everyone who walks in here, almost everyone knows my by name. I’ve hired lots of young kids – boys and girls, hundreds of them – and some

have worked their way into it.”

One cook, Dee Hanes, has worked at the Chico restaurant for 25 years, doing all day’s prep work from 5:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. A few went on to purchase different restaurants from him and become owners of their own businesses.

“Six or eight years of college, some of them had, to sell tacos,” he said jokingly. “Good thing I only had one year. My son does it all now. When I started I was my own cook and janitor. I didn’t have an adding machine. Now we’ve got computers, a copier, fax machines, but I don’t even know how to turn the computer on.”

Pavis said the holiday season is a time he enjoys because so many friends and former employees come “home” to Chico to visit their families, as well as stopping in to say hello. “Names I forget, but faces I’m good with. They’ve changed so much when they come back, and I’ve got 50 employees in here all the time.”

Pavis is surprised his restaurants have become such a hit with families, particularly children, whom he loves to tease. “We get families and lots of kids. I never thought a Mexican restaurant would be a family place. I didn’t think kids would like it, but sometimes I think we should call it La Comida Day Care,” he said.

long time (cont.)

Pavis said he'd be the last person to call his restaurants' Mexican food "authentic" for several reasons. "It's not really Mexican food, it's just based on the concept. We don't use an ounce of lard – there's not any in the house – and we fry our chips in canola oil. We don't use any deep-fat fryers for our chile rellenos. And the beans? Just a little salt and pepper, and they're delicious. Beans are funny; they're like spaghetti sauce. If you let them cook they'll get more of their own flavor."

Pavis was raised on a farm in Modesto, and finished his last year of high school in San Francisco.

How did you come to Chico, and what's kept you here?

"I was working for United Artists, which owned the old diner building on Main Street. We tore two or three houses down to make room for that building. In 1955 I opened a hamburger place, Cal's Drive Inn, with 19-cent hamburgers and 99 cents for half a fried chicken. I stayed with that company for five years, and they made me a district manager.

"In 1968 I opened La Comida, as a spin-off from a franchise. Now there are La Comidas in Paradise, Red Bluff, Sacramento, Oregon and Washington, but I don't still own all of them. I never thought it would become the family affair it has. I really didn't know anything about Mexican food, but I knew the restaurant business and I lucked out in some way, by some accident.

"I got here and liked Chico, joined the Elks, my company treated me well, and I stayed."

He and his wife Dottie have a son, and she has a daughter; between them there are four

grandchildren.

What are your priorities:

"Golf. I've only been playing for about 20 years. I didn't start young. We didn't have the means when we were young kids that they have nowadays. I'm a member of the Butte Creek Country Club."

Pavis also travels, and just returned from a trip to Canada with seven other couples, where he spent eight days. "I love Canada," he said. "It's so nice there. If I'd been young I wouldn't have come back."

What's a typical day in your life?

"Every day, seven days a week, I'm here (at the restaurant) at 7 a.m. At 10 I go to the club to play golf, then I come back in the evening to fool around in the dining room with the customers. I don't get back there and cook like I used to. But I'm not retired. I should have retired, but now it's too late. I'm too old to retire. I'd bet my son would like me to retire and get out of here."

What role does money play?

"It's what makes the world go 'round for sure. I wouldn't call it the root of all evil, but everybody wants it. Money is a necessity and there are no two ways about it."

Are there any reasons you've enjoyed such good health?

"Not really. I live a simple life. I don't smoke or drink."

What are your goals in the next five years?

"I shouldn't do this at my age, but I want to open another restaurant, maybe in Oroville, to keep my family going. We travel a lot. In June we were in Santa Rosa playing golf for a week and we go to Hawaii every year. I play a little cards in the afternoons. I just wish I were 20 so I could do it all again."