



Hail Caesar's

In an industry notorious for its failure rate, Caesar's Steak House has stood the test of time — 40 years, if you're counting

by Shelley Arnusch photography by Jared Sych



From left to right

George Kaketsis,
Nick Kaketsis,
Con Giannoulis and
Gerry Stuart.

here's an archetypal restaurant that grandad dreams about when he dozes off in front of the TV with his glasses on his chest.

It's clad in dark panels and upholstered in red leather. The martinis are clear, the serving staff are mature and the smell of expertly charred beef hangs so thick in the air, you can still smell it on your clothes three days after

you've pushed your chair back from the table, retrieved your coat from the girl manning the automated rack and sauntered out into the night, sucking on a chalky mint and mindlessly tonguing a toothpick.

It's the kind of place that has played host to countless sportsmen and the odd celebrity or two; the kind of place where moustaches are sported without a trace of irony or charitable largesse. The kind of place that stays the same the more things change.

If grandad lives in, has ever lived in or has visited Calgary on a regular basis, there's a good chance that place is Caesar's Steak House.

When you consider how much Calgary's downtown has changed in the last decade, just imagine what things were like back in the late 1960s. A couple of conspicuous high-rises poked their heads above a general mish-mash of squat buildings like curious prairie dogs. There was no Olympic Plaza. No shiny blue Municipal Building or chic shopping Core, and the paint was still drying on the Calgary Tower. Pock-marked with empty lots and lined to the north by a row of derelict single-family homes, 4th Avenue S.W. was not what you'd call an inviting stroll. The strip featured a motel and a vacant two-storey building that had once housed a print shop.

But something about that print shop caught the eye of a foursome of young Greek immigrants, small restaurant owners all, who were ready to hang up their shingle on something splashy. While it likely didn't look like the real estate deal of the century, Nick Kaketsis, Con Giannoulis, Louie Tsaprailis and Louie Girgulis purchased the property. It would turn out to be a prescient decision — considering the restaurant industry's notorious failure rate, being your own landlord is certainly one way to tilt the odds in your favour. They converted it into a 180-seat dining room and 70-seat lounge and named it Julius Caesar's Steak House (Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas being the acknowledged inspiration). Kaketsis took over the dining room, Tsaprailis took the reins in the lounge and Giannoulis held court over the kitchen.

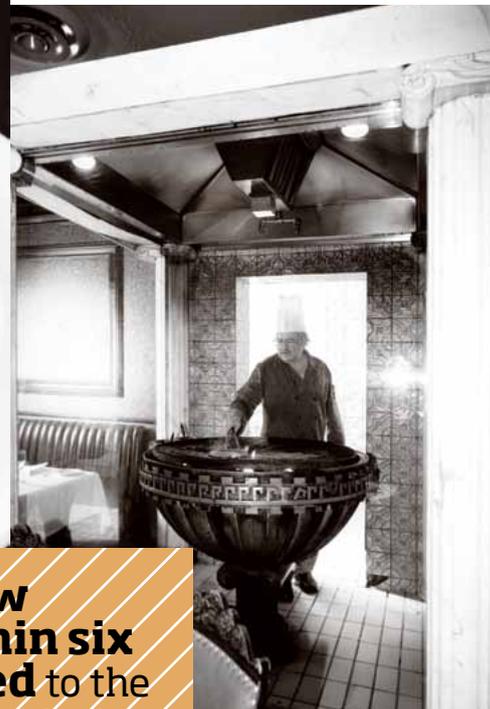
On the night of Wednesday, April 26, 1972, they fired up the broiler and opened the doors.

Even if you own your own building, however, you won't get anywhere in the restaurant business if you don't give customers what they want. Caesar's, as it would come to be known, figured out what the people in this town wanted pretty much right off the bat: steak. Beautiful, blushing, beefy slabs, seared over a flaming broiler.

Just in case there was any doubt in anyone's mind that the steak was to be the star here, the broiler was put on display in a glass-walled enclosure that jutted out into the main dining room, the main event in a nightly floor show that also featured a cast of wait staff bearing baskets of cheese and garlic bread and tiny tubs of sour cream, bacon bits and chives to garnish the football-sized stuffed potatoes.

On the first night they were open, the heat from the broiler set off the sprinkler system, an unwelcome deluge christening the kitchen, though nothing so serious as to dampen the staff's spirits. Giannoulis recalls there were around 40 to 50 customers in the house. "If that happened today," he muses, "it would be a disaster."

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"They were calling us 'the second Petroleum Club' because it was all men in the lounge in those days," says Giannoulis. "There was a lot of deals made in the lounge in those days." Today's oilmen still head to Caesar's to celebrate, though the former leniency about drinking and driving is no longer appreciated.

Still, the saying still goes around these parts that if you want a barometer on how the oil patch is doing, stop by Caesar's at lunch. There's something inherently celebratory about a steak dinner, or, as Kaketsis's son, George, puts it: "When you close a deal, no one ever suggests everyone go out for fish."

Of course, barometer readings can't stay high and what goes up must come down. Over its four decades in business, Caesar's held fast through four recessions, the great bust of the 1980s and three booms. During the first recession, Giannoulis recalls, contemporaries were offering two-for-one meal discounts and other incentives, believing increased liquor sales would make up the difference. Caesar's, however, grit its teeth and decided not to get on that train, believing that slashing prices was not something that could be done without slashing standards as well.

"We said, 'We'll hang on, doing what we're doing, keep on doing a good job and selling

good food and good service and we'll survive,'" Giannoulis says.

The owners stayed their hand, determined to, if it came to it, burn out classy rather than fade away. It was a decision that would see Caesar's live to see the barometer rise again, enough to warrant adding a second location, in Willow Park, in 1985.

Caesar's took a similarly principled stance when, in 2003, its culinary raison d'être — Alberta beef — came under fire due to an outbreak of mad cow disease in the province. "I remember one time, the CBC asked me what I'm doing about it, and I said, 'Well, I'm doing nothing about it because the suppliers supplied me beef since the day we opened. I trust them and, if it goes through them, then that means there is no panic,'" Giannoulis says.

Through bust, boom and beef, the Caesar's restaurants would indeed survive to broil another day.

And broil they did. That's really all they've ever needed to do. One criticism of Caesar's — that over 40 years in business it's done little to evolve — is also its highest praise. To be fair, it's not like things haven't changed at all since the downtown location opened 40 years back, although the last renovations took place 30 years ago, in 1981 and 1982.

From left to right

Louis Eliopoulos,
Ken Fletcher,
Danny Zein.

Not that lack of change is necessarily a bad thing. “That’s kind of the way everyone likes it, the fact that it hasn’t changed,” says longtime local food critic and *Avenue* contributor John Gilchrist. “Not everything has to change every couple years. I recently visited a restaurant that opened five years ago. It looks dated. This is what happens when you try to be so much of the moment, then what happens when that moment passes?”

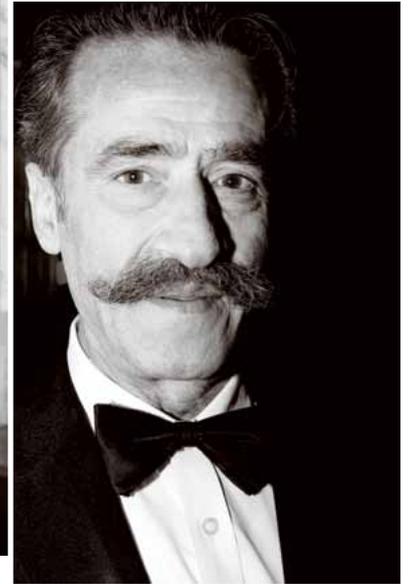
“A place like Caesar’s, it just always has been what it is. If you have a problem with that, too bad. The guys have got it down. They know what they’re doing.”

What they’re doing in that former 4th Avenue print shop is creating the kind of Western Canadian experience visitors come seeking, putting forth the type of steakhouse that tourists put on their “when in Calgary” checklists.

The celebrities who have sat in Caesar’s dining room are often in town filming Western-genre films. Brad Pitt ate there during the shoot for *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, as did Morgan Freeman during the filming of *Unforgiven*. Tom Selleck and his ‘stache have graced the premises. Robert Duvall is a repeat visitor. Even comic Don Rickles held court once, proving to be as much of a cut-up in real life as he is on the screen.

Sports celebs tend to like the cut of Caesar’s jib as well: retired NHL coach Scotty Bowman has a designated table, just in front of the broiler. According to Kaketsis, Bowman was known to prefer mealtime solitude, choosing to sit alone, even when the rest of whatever team he happened to be helming at the time was also dining that night. Multiple Stanley Cup-winner Glenn Anderson still comes by when he’s in town.

Seminal boy band New Kids On The Block were almost turned away by Kaketsis at the height of their fame, on account of their precisely ripped



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denim attire (the 1970s jacket-required dress code wasn’t in effect at that point, but even so...).

Politicians have shown up in droves: local talent like Stephen Harper, Ed Stelmach, Ralph Klein and Joe Clark; out-of-towners like Paul Martin and John Turner (according to Kaketsis, “a very funny guy”). Former U.S. President George H.W. Bush even came to Caesar’s. Pierre Trudeau did not.

While it’s a kind of parlour-game fun for Caesar’s visitors to consider what celebrity butt might have sat on the red-leather upholstery of the solid, but well-used dining room chairs, it’s most likely that chair held a repeat customer, another pillar of the restaurant’s impressive longevity. It might be one of the old guard who furrows their brow at how far down standards of dress have gone, or it might be one of the deceptively down-dressed, energy-sector big shots who continues to consider the place the city’s second Petroleum Club (bankers and lawyers wear suits, says Kaketsis; oilmen don’t). Or it might be one of the young turks of Stephen Avenue looking to tap into a scene with roots deeper than margarita Monday at the 3rd Street Earl’s.

In a city where four decades might as well be four centuries, Caesar’s is undeniably old-school. Now in their 70s, the remain-

ing owners (Tsaprailis passed away in 1999, Giregulis in 2001) are no spring chickens, either. Giannoulis says he comes in less and less these days, just to visit his former kitchen domain and to hang out with the dwindling crew of longtime regulars (no parking, he grumbles), and Kaketsis is relaxing his grip on the front of house, finger by finger, allowing son George to drive the Caesar’s empire into the next four decades. While the intention is to give the Willow Park location a bit of a facelift, there are no plans to alter the original Caesar’s, just a desire to keep things as the customers like them.

It makes sense. The steak dinners served up at the downtown Caesar’s are as big a part of the Calgary mystique as the ranching culture. If you ask both Kaketsis and Giannoulis to name a favourite night in the past four decades, neither one will say it involved any particular celebrity or big-name politician. Rather, it’s just those nondescript evenings when the vibe is lively and the house is full, and there’s a residual sense of awe that four kids from the mountains of Greece could end up here and create something so profound.

That’s because a steak dinner can be more than just a meal; it can turn into a ritual of sorts, best performed not by a restaurant, but by an institution. ■