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Steakhouse keeps spirit of old Hollywood alive

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NATIONAL CITY – History is a tricky thing. It shifts with memories, can be changed by word of mouth, and rests incomplete on documents from eras gone by.

Take the history of Cafe La Maze, a National City landmark on Highland Avenue that recently reopened under new ownership. The restaurant's redesign pays homage to the 1940s Hollywood stars who are said to have frequented the cafe on their way to and from gambling and other vices in Mexico.

Famed Hollywood photographer George Hurrell's photos of Joan Crawford, Jane Russell and Veronica Lake line the red-flocked silver walls, above red leather booths. Behind the bar is an Al Hirschfeld-style mural by San Diego artists Eric Koestler and Keith Green depicting celebrities the new owners believe once visited the cafe, including Clark Gable, Errol Flynn, the Marx Brothers, and Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy.

In a place of honor on the back wall hangs a reproduced photo of the legendary restaurateur Marcel Lamaze, seen with Marlene Dietrich and Fritz Lang at the Cafe Lamaze in Hollywood. It's a lovely tribute to Lamaze, who, according to the Cafe La Maze Web site, founded the supper club.

There's just one problem: Lamaze, a famous maitre d'hotel in the 1930s and 1940s, wasn't the founder. Cafe La Maze opened with Jimmy Thompson, proprietor, on Dec. 24, 1940, according to advertisements and an article in the December 1940 issues of the *National City News*, now the *National City Star News*.

Somewhere along the line, Jimmy Thompson disappeared and Marcel Lamaze got promoted.

“It's really hard to research these things,” said Jonathon Foerstel, an amateur historian who runs latimemachines.com, a Web site devoted to the history of bars, restaurants and restaurateurs in Los Angeles and other major cities. “About the only things you can use are the digitized newspapers. That generation (of people) is disappearing fast.”

The story of how Thompson got lost and Lamaze found plays out like a game of telephone.

Adam Cook and Cuong Nguyen, the owners since October, said they believed Lamaze to be the original owner, having heard about him from their designer, Michele Gonzalez, and others. Gonzalez heard of him from John Busarelos, son of Nick Busarelos, who owned the restaurant from 2004 to 2007.

John Busarelos said he had heard of the restaurateur from the previous owner, Freddie Evarkiou, who told him the restaurant's name originated from Marcel Lamaze. Busarelos knew Thompson was the original owner, but believed Lamaze was the one who brought the Hollywood connection, especially after he said he was contacted by one of Lamaze's grandsons, whose name escapes him. The grandson gave Busarelos a photograph of Lamaze, which has been reproduced and now hangs in the restaurant.

Marcel Lamaze's name popped up regularly in Read Kendall's “Out and About in Hollywood” and in Hedda Hopper's columns as the stars dined at his establishments in Los Angeles, including the Cafe Lamaze on Sunset,

Ciro's, Cafe Seville and the Clover Club.

Busarelos said Lamaze's grandson "said he knew that his grandfather was involved with various restaurants, like a consultant or someone who had a reputation for making places work, and he heard that he had done something like that in San Diego."

Evarkiou, who owned the National City restaurant from 1969 to 2004, said Lamaze had no connection to the place. "No, none whatsoever that I know of."

Evarkiou bought the restaurant from Thompson, who originally sold it sometime around 1945, only to buy it again in the late 1960s. In 1966, co-owners Jay Franken, Jere Davis and J.C. Wagoner remodeled Cafe La Maze into the Plantation Restaurant, but by 1967, the restaurant had returned to its original name.

It was the quality steaks and the gambling that brought the Hollywood crowd to the cafe, Evarkiou said.

"(Thompson) had steaks when nobody else had them," Evarkiou said.

Through much of the 1940s, food was subject to rationing, but 1941 advertisements for Cafe La Maze emphasize custom-cut, blue-ribbon steaks flown in from Kansas City.

There is one connection Evarkiou noted: Many of the current recipes came indirectly from Lamaze, gathered through the years by different chefs.

"He was an excellent chef," John Costello, Lamaze's stepson, wrote in an e-mail. "Occasionally some celeb would be invited over to the house so Marcel could cook a special meal for them, usually French."

Costello, who didn't meet Lamaze until 1947, said he had no knowledge of his stepfather's involvement with Cafe La Maze in National City. Historian Foerstel said it's almost impossible that Lamaze would have opened a place in National City without being on the advertisements or mentioned in the press.

"He was one of the top 10 greatest restaurateurs in Hollywood and L.A.," Foerstel said.

Regardless of Marcel Lamaze's involvement, Cafe La Maze's authenticated history includes plenty of drama. In the 1940s, patrons could slip through a secret passageway in the manager's office and visit an illegal gambling room upstairs, with craps tables and poker. Food would be sent up from the kitchen via dumbwaiter.

In June 1947, then-manager Thompson was one of six men arrested for violating gambling laws during then-District Attorney Don Keller's midnight raid on the establishment. A box of loaded dice was found hidden behind a curtain on the windowsill. The six men were fined \$125 each.

"The restaurant has certainly had its sordid past," said National City Mayor Ron Morrison, who eats there a few times a month. "It's had a great history and, to be honest, the sordidness ties into the Hollywood stuff and ties into the ambience that much more."

A favorite with the current City Council, the landmark steakhouse has always been a place for movers and shakers.

"Always the elite would go there," said Irma Noah, a National City native who dined there once a month. "The councilmen, the mayors. New Year's, you'd find them there. The ladies would dress in formals."

Noah remembers it as a gathering place, good for special occasions.

"If you wanted to go someplace not the ordinary, you'd always go to Cafe La Maze," Noah said.

Kitchen manager Theatric Appleberry said the menu hasn't changed in 20 years, offering steak and seafood, prime rib and lobster. The restaurant cuts its own steaks and makes its own soups and popular blue cheese dressing from scratch.

"We've been using the same recipe for years," Appleberry said.

Cook and Nguyen, who also own the Bluefoot Bar and Lounge in North Park, are looking to make their own history

with Cafe La Maze. They have a 25-year lease.

“We plan on being here for a while,” Cook said.

■ Jennifer K Mahal is a San Diego-based freelance writer.

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