

METRO

Barn-red eatery started as 'country kitchen'

Driving by the Barn Door the other day brought back a flood of childhood memories from family dinners to birthday celebrations. It also made me realize that even though I had been briefly employed there, I knew next to nothing about the history of the place. I am wondering if you could help answer a few questions like when did it open, who was the original owner, who owns it now



PAULA ALLEN

and was there another business there before the Barn Door.

— **Sherri Vee Thrailkill**

If you've attended a

special event or celebrated a special occasion over the past six decades or so, chances are you've been to the Barn Door, whose combination of broiled entrees, classic sides and desserts and a Western-style atmosphere is part of generations of San Antonio family memories.

The Tassos family operated the Barn Door for its first quarter-century. William C. "Bill" Tassos, who had previous restaurant experience with Damon's at 110 Austin Highway and Nomad's on Go-liad Road, opened the steakhouse in September 1953 with investors Dan Kiber, his father-in-law, and Odessa oil operator Bandy Lee, a close friend and mentor.

As with Scrivener's department store and San Antonio Municipal Airport, the restaurant's location initially was considered "out in the coun-



Courtesy of Billy Tassos

Owner and General Manager Bill Tassos was the genial host of the Western-theme steakhouse.

try." The address was "officially 8435 N. New Braunfels," said the founder's son, William D. "Billy" Tassos, "but since it was in the 8400 block and in the middle of nowhere, 8400 became the mailing address and it stuck."

Researchers at the Conservation Society of San Antonio library found that the address doesn't appear in the San Antonio city directory until 1955. The sprawling, one-and-a-half story building was rumored to have housed "a beer garden and even a house of ill repute," the younger Tassos said, but no restaurants are mentioned until the Barn Door's immediate predecessor.

That was the short-lived Frazer's Country Kitchen, heralded for its rustic setting in the San Antonio Light, Oct. 12, 1952: "Genial Joe Frazer, operator of Frazer's at 8400 N. New Braunfels, has this fitting slogan for his spot: 'The charm of a country kitchen.'"

The Tassos scion, who



Courtesy of Billy Tassos

Tassos opened the Barn Door in 1953 on North New Braunfels Avenue. It became a favorite destination for birthdays with its sign becoming a popular fixture.

has written a brief history of his family's involvement with the Barn Door, based on the memories of family and friends, says that its predecessor is sometimes referred to as Frazer's Bar-B-Que, "even though barbecue wasn't on the menu." Owners Vera and Joe Frazer served country-style dishes such as fried chicken, chicken-fried steak and some Mexican-food plates.

"Joe managed the business, while Vera decorated it," according to Tassos' history. Much of the aesthetic we associate with the Barn Door started with Mrs. Frazer, the history states: "She was instrumental in having the building painted red, (and) Vera's mother, Riggs Reinhardt, sewed the red-and-white gingham

curtains and tablecloths."

The elder Tassos took over the lease and bought equipment from the Frazers.

"Joe was well-respected by his employees and made sure my father retained the essential ones for employment with the new venture," Tassos wrote in his history. The new owner kept the country look and added to it: "To impart atmosphere, (Bill Tassos) has erected a fence around the restaurant like one finds in corals," reported the Light, Aug. 20, 1953. Patrons could "select their own steaks and watch them broil over a charcoal fire in a big fireplace."

The country setting along with the red-painted building "inspired a family friend, Dr. Sylvia Johns, to

suggest calling the new business the Barn Door," Billy Tassos said, noting that his father did some remodeling to intensify the theme: "He personally built the brick fireplace where the steaks were grilled in the main dining room. He hung fake hams from the ceilings and stapled up empty egg cartons, both to help with the acoustics. He also put in cedar posts with railings, made horseshoe prints in freshly poured concrete and decorated with old saddles, wagon wheels and small farm equipment — all to create a rustic, barnlike atmosphere."

The restaurant opened on Sept. 21, 1953, with Tassos as sole proprietor. Billy Tassos was 6 years old.

"In the beginning," the son said, "my father did all the prep chores himself. He cut the meat, made the salad dressings and cleaned the place, getting ready for the night's business, until he was able to train employees to take care of those tasks."

Tassos continued as the Barn Door's host, greeting customers and escorting them to their tables.

"Friendly employees welcomed guests with a smile in a way that was instrumental in creating a cozy atmosphere that helped develop a loyal clientele," says his son's history.

"The business soon became a favorite destination for birthdays, with the birthday sign becoming a popular fixture. My father credited his success to his loyal employees."

Quirky features, such as rooms papered in business cards or the menus of top restaurants from other cities, also were part of the appeal.

In 1972, Billy Tassos and his brother Danny took over management of the Barn Door and bought the business from their dad in 1976. Years later, businessman David J. Straus, who was in a consortium with the elder Tassos that owned the Stockman restaurant, bought out the Tassos brothers and continued operating the Barn Door.

Today, the Barn Door is owned by Randy Stokes, who bought it in 2011.

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