

The Original Tops

3838 E. Colorado Blvd.
Pasadena
(626) 449-4412
theoriginaltops.com

Sunday through Thursday, 6:30 a.m. to 11 p.m.;
Friday and Saturday, 6:30 a.m. to midnight

Gus's Barbecue

808 Fair Oaks Ave.
South Pasadena
(626) 799-3251
gussbbq.com

Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.;
Friday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; Saturday, 8:30 a.m. to 11 p.m.;
Sunday, 8:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.



Pastrami Burger

They're the Top!

Chris and John Bicos, owners of two of Pasadena's oldest casual eateries — The Original Tops and Gus's Barbecue — know the secret ingredients for restaurant longevity.

BY BRADLEY TUCK

THE PERIOD BETWEEN THANKSGIVING AND CHRISTMAS CAN BE A MAGICAL TIME, WHETHER YOU'RE CLEARING SNOW FROM YOUR DRIVEWAY UP NORTH OR PUTTING AWAY THE GRILL HERE IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. IT'S A TIME FOR SHARING WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY AND REFLECTING ON THE YEAR PAST AS YOU PREPARE FOR THE ONE AHEAD. IT HAS BEEN AN INTERESTING FEW MONTHS LEADING UP TO THIS YEAR'S HOLIDAYS, AS THE RECENT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION HAS FORCED PEOPLE TO PONDER THEIR IDEA OF THE AMERICAN DREAM. ONE RECURRING THEME IS THAT THE LIFE BLOOD OF AMERICA IS ITS SMALL BUSINESSES — IT'S THE INGENUITY AND HARD WORK OF SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS THAT HAVE HELPED THIS COUNTRY TO GROW.

PHOTO: Vanessa Slump



Stephan Bicos flanked by his sons, John (left) and Chris



A prime example is a gentleman named Stephan Bicos, who in 1949 (at age 15) arrived in Chicago, leaving behind his native Greece. He worked hard and saved his money and, soon after, headed west to Pasadena where, with his uncle, he opened up a little coffee shop called Tops, which served up burgers and breakfasts. By the time Bicos was 19 he had bought out his uncle, becoming a teenage sole proprietor. Over time, the business grew and became a pioneer of casual dining, with a drive-through. He raised a family, and sons John and Chris gradually took over the reins. This year The Original Tops, as the restaurant is now known, celebrated 60 years in business. No mean achievement in a world of chain eateries and ever-shortening customer attention spans.

That's not all. A different crop of relatives — Gus, Jack and Mike — had already emigrated to the U.S. before him. Leaving a family-owned bar in Cleveland, they did what so many others had done and would do: They headed down Route 66, stopping at diners in the Midwest and South, finally settling in South Pasadena. They bought a diner named Hamburger Mac's and re-opened it as Gus's Barbecue. Over the next 40 years, Gus's became a neighborhood institution. So when the place was sold in 2007,

there was understandable neighborhood trepidation, but the locals had nothing to worry about. The buyers were Chris and John Bicos.

Over time, Gus's had developed the patina of age. And while a bright vintage neon sign out front blared the word "Bar-B-Q," in reality the menu focused more on traditional diner fare. Tuna melts, anyone? Now, a big smoker behind the restaurant, with the apt brand name Southern Pride, handles as many as 150 racks of ribs a day, smoking them over pecan wood for 4 ½ hours, until they melt off the fork. Framed black-and-white photographs of Gus' family hang in the dining rooms. Shiny dark-wood floors grace the expansive room at the back of the restaurant, while a gleaming bar serves guests watching the game on a big flat-screen TV.

The brothers divide their time between Gus's and The Original Tops, sharing responsibility for the businesses. "We're so hands-on that we're always together and just taking care of whatever needs to be done," says John. They instill in their staff the lessons they learned from their father. "When we're hiring, we can tell right off the bat if someone is going to be that person who rushes over to hold open the door for a guest or not," John says. "You have to care, and it takes a specific type of person to work in our restaurants." Case in point: "If there is a mistake in an order, I've had the order remade and personally hand-delivered it myself to someone's home. Because of the level of service we provide and the fact that it's a family-owned business, we go above and beyond."

I'm reminded of my own days working in an Italian family café in London, where elder customers' eyes widened in disbelief if you had to ask them what they'd like to drink or eat, because they'd been going there for 30 years or more. Where every customer was greeted with *bongiorno*. Where the owner gave you a discreet nod when customers were to have their espressos "courtesy of Antonio."

Says elder brother Chris, "Our father built the business on the basic principles of hospitality and service — create a welcoming environment, reach out and go above and beyond, and have a family atmosphere. Having a business in operation for so many years has given our dad a chance to see kids grow up, have a family of their own and share the restaurant experience with their kids."

Interestingly, when I asked Chris and John whether their dad was tougher on them than on other employees, Chris had this to say: "He actually tried to push us away from the restaurant business because it was a hard business. Like most immigrants coming to America, he thought it would be easier for us to have an office job than to be a restaurant owner. But he saw the passion that we had for the business and the commitment to it. And we saw the opportunity. I've actually been tougher on John than my father was, like a big brother should be." ||||