

# The New Old Place Same as the Old Old Place Just a Little More

■ Mountain Tradition Is Alive and Well but Now Offers More than Steak and Clams

It is easy to believe in time travel once you walk into the Old Place. Located in the laid-back hollow known as Cornell, just a short distance off of Kanan-Dume road in Malibu, the area isn't the land time forgot. It's more apt to say the land time got just right, where the sunlight caresses the sturdy old sycamores in a permanent state of what photographers refer to as the "magic hour," that seductive late afternoon sun which casts a perfect glow on everything.

Spending one hour here feels like you've been on vacation. With the new Cornell Winery tasting room next door serving up local handcrafted wines, the triumvirate of buildings slowly rebuilt by the Runyon family between the Old Place and the French antique store Charme D'Antan is complete, with plenty of reasons to spend several leisurely hours throughout. No stress, no noise, no running. When you're ready, just mosey on over to the Old Place, walk up the porch's creaky wooden steps and slide in next to the old wooden bar. That's the way it's always been, since Tom and Barbara Runyon first opened 40 years ago.

## Them Old Shoes

At the end of July, Tom Runyon died at the age of 89, after living a long life his way according to most people you ask. "Being the maverick that he was, when he decided to open a restaurant he didn't go and look in a logical place to put a restaurant," son Morgan Runyon said. "He went and found the cool building in the middle of nowhere."

He also established a loyal following for all these years with some pretty stern rules for being off the grid. Steak and clams only. Cash only. No outside food or drink. Sometimes they weren't even open when they were supposed to be. Yet folks would still always peek in, just in case. "My mom always said, 'If you want sour cream on your baked potato there are plenty of places along the highway that serve it that way so you better go and get it over there,'" Morgan said. Or, in his words, "You get what you get and you don't get upset."



**SECOND GENERATION**—The food is still served on Tom Runyon's original mis-matched china and the ambience remains the same, but son Morgan Runyon is working to expand the Old Place's original two-item menu to include offerings like locally caught lobster and seasonal vegetables. Locals will still be able to order steak and shrimp, Runyon says. Followed, perhaps, with a helping of blueberry cobbler and whipped cream.

In the latter years, Tom was the guy in the kitchen wearing funny hats individually hand-carving each steak next to an open flame or sitting amidst a group of friends telling stories near the fire. Barbara was the one drawing on white index cards, the same ones she took drink and food orders on, behind the bar next to an old globe and a pile of New Yorker magazines.

The drinks always came fast, along with regular updates on the food, which generally took about an hour or so, depending on how hot the fire was. Regulars would say it was exactly the way steak was supposed to taste. They'd also say that you don't go to the Old Place to eat, you go for the conversation. Funny thing is, no one ever left any crumbs on their plates, which in any wholesome eatin' home is the true testament of a great meal.

## Them Old Shoes with a Little Shine

Morgan was a small boy when his folks bought the Old Place back in 1969. He and his sister, Alessandra, used to sleep out back in the car while the grown-ups minded the restaurant. Throughout the years, Morgan would help his dad in the restaurant, cooking side by side with him learning all the trade

secrets. He and his brother-in-law also rebuilt the two buildings next to the Old Place that burned down long ago using plenty of recycled materials, completing Tom and Barbara's vision of rehabilitating the old Cornell center. After all, the Old Place used to be the old post office and general store back in the late 1800s and early 1900s along the once well-traversed stagecoach route.

When Tom's illness was worsening, Morgan took off four months from his work as an art director and production designer to spend time with his father. During the day he would work at the Old Place fixing whatever needed to be done on the property and in the evenings he'd return to care for his dad. This is when the new and old generation of Runyon's came to an understanding about the future of the Old Place.

"He wanted me to fill his shoes," Morgan said, "but I have my own shoes to fill." After Morgan explained the improvements he wanted to make to the restaurant, his father gave his blessing and Morgan began the process of becoming its new owner.

Morgan enlisted the help of his friend Tim Skogstrom, owner of the Cornell Winery next door, who has had extensive experi-

ence with the restaurant and wine world, and together the two set out to find a chef to run the kitchen and help extend the menu from two items to six.

After placing ads and extensively interviewing and testing several people with dismal results, they

open, all three of them—Morgan, Tim and David—were in the back with their arms around each other. "After all the problems finding the right guy for this position, we realized that Tom had had a hand in this, that he was actually deciding who was going to be the one."

Today the menu is focused on local, seasonal ingredients that change weekly, with recent additions being wild rosemary pale ale chicken, braised short ribs, grilled fish, and even a grilled vegetable salad. A cheese plate, cured meats and grilled garden plate are also on the menu for starters and even a weekly dessert offering, such as the recent (much improved and delectable) blueberry cobbler with citrus whipped cream rounds.

The menu's mainstays are, of course, the tried and true hand-cut oak grilled Black Angus sirloin steak and steamed littleneck clams, which are served every week as they have been for 40 years. An authentic bonus to both the new and standard menu items is that every meal is served on a plate from the mismatched collection of dinnerware that Tom had assembled over the past 40 years.

Morgan, Tim and David all work on the menu together each week.

"They have their ideas and I have mine and we meet in the middle," Morgan said. In actuality, Morgan added, it's the Old Place that figures out the menu with its west coast, rustic elements.

In October he hopes to be serving lobsters from Malibu and in January he's looking forward to incorporating chanterelle mushrooms from the Santa Monica Mountains. "It's about keeping things close to home," he said. "It's not about customizing something because we've already got that figured out, or at least we hope we have it figured out by the time people walk in that door."

Since its grand reopening in August, the changes Morgan has made to the restaurant have been welcomed by customers who regularly packed the 40 seat restaurant and still clear their plates Thursday through Sunday nights for dinner.

Diners can now also bring their own wine to the restaurant for a minimum \$20 corkage fee, which is reduced to \$5 if the wine is purchased next door from the Cornell Winery. And rumor has it that a credit card machine is in the works, too.

"My dad taught me that you don't have to conform unless you want to," Morgan said. "This place has been pretty much the same since it opened and you either get it or you don't. Ninety percent of the people get it once they walk in the door and the others who don't, well, I guess shouldn't be here," Morgan said, Runyon style. "There is a whole level of respect for what it is and it has to be mutual because this is one of the last pieces of soul in the area."

The Old Place is open Thursday through Sunday nights from 4 p.m.-midnight, abiding by a permanent golden rule that the doors aren't locked until the fire is out. If you're lucky, resident musician Billy Gale will sing you a song and you may even catch Barbara smiling in the corner (not having to take people's orders anymore) and watching her son carry on the Runyon legacy.

BY SONIA MAGDEVSKI

“  
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happened upon David Asher. "Here was this guy covered in tattoos wearing a dress shirt and pants, carrying two copies of his resume and a freshly made fruit cobbler to his first interview," Skogstrom said. "The cobbler was dry but we were impressed with his style."

After David's test run in the kitchen at the end of their first Saturday night