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 CLOSE-UP: TANIA & JEFF KACHA

Hob Nob Hill still charms locals with cozy atmosphere, traditional American cuisine

By BRIE IATAROLA, Special to the Daily Transcript
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The first time Tania and Jeff Kacha sat down for breakfast at Hob Nob Hill, they knew what they wanted before they even opened their menus.

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"We thought, 'Someday we would like to own this place,'" Tania said.

The aspiring restaurateurs faced one obstacle, however: After 49 years of running the famed eatery on Banker's Hill, founder Harold Hoersch planned to sell it to someone else.

Until, that is, he met the Kachas, who were working at a tiny coffee shop in east San Diego.

"(Hoersch) asked, 'What would you do if I sold it to you?'" Tania recounted. "Jeff said, 'Nothing.'"



Jeff Kacha

That was just what the former owner needed to hear. Reluctant to see the city's oldest restaurant, open since May 1944, become a steakhouse, Hoersch abandoned the original offer. Instead, he accepted a down payment from the couple in 1993 and "carried the note."

"We didn't change anything," said the 45-year-old petite Miami transplant. "We've taken a couple of things off the menu that weren't big sellers over the years, but the recipes are all the same, and we've kept all the same people," including longtime server Margo Hicks.

Hicks, 58, has worked at Hob Nob for 21 years, an anomaly in an industry notorious for high turnover.

"I used to be the young one, and now I'm the older one," she said with a laugh. "The money's good, and I think we serve great food. We try really hard to make it an enjoyable experience for everyone."

Aging gracefully

Part of the experience includes the unchanged atmosphere. Abstract artwork, still-life paintings and a family of mirrors adorn the walls. An oversized clock ticks above the cashier station, and crystal chandeliers dangle from the ceiling over maroon carpet.

Even the clientele remains the same. Doctors, judges, lawyers and business executives huddle in booths with red leather seats, devouring poached eggs Benedict and roast beef hash in the early hours. A younger crowd wanders in for brunch. Come lunch and dinnertime, seniors are swapping stories over Mr. Salad Bowls, three-decker Manhattans, old-fashioned beef stew and French-fried Eastern scallops.

"It's a safe place to come and have a good time, talk to people on a daily basis," Tania said. "You learn about what's happening. ... I've seen a lot of people come and a lot of people go. We plan to stick around."

Staying put may be the wisest choice the Kachas make while the landscape transforms outside Hob Nob's double doors with stained-glass windows. These days, condominium developments dot the street corners of Banker's Hill.

"It seems like they're coming up, little by little," Tania said, "and I would hope that brings more business in years to come."

Furthermore, restaurant chains and franchises are offering attractive deals for the cash-strapped, and many consumers now venture downtown for gourmet fare.

"The Gaslamp has pull," Tania said. "Our location at nighttime is kinda desolate. ... In this area, especially for us, it's the competition. A lot of people want to become restaurateurs, but they don't know how hard it is to survive."

The Katchas, however, do. Over the years, they have added a few healthier eats to the menu and recently tried tweaking hours of operation, a move that some diners protested immediately.

"We're trying to keep it as it is while (being) more health-conscious," Tania said. "We've gotten a lot of slack from our regular customers. ... We're still gonna close on Mondays at 3 p.m., but we're back to our regular hours: 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. It's all about maintaining and updating."



Tania Kacha

Despite the competition and evolving neighborhood, Jeff maintains Hob Nob's longevity gives it an edge.

"We have a niche," said the 46-year-old native San Diegan. "We like to think our service is far more superior. Our customers are very loyal. They know what we have to offer."

For Sandra Morales, a "70-something" Hob Nobber with house-charge privileges, it is classic American cuisine.

"I've been eating here for 22 years," she said as she munched on toast. "Last month I came here every day for two weeks. They bill me every month. The food is lovely, and the place is immaculate. I love their baked chicken. ... I love their breakfasts. I'll sit anywhere they ask me."

Cecille Smith, an 87-year-old La Mesa resident, expressed similar sentiments.

"I moved to San Diego in 1982 and have been coming to Hob Nob since then," she said. "I like it because everyone is friendly, the food is excellent, and I feel at home here. The hot (roast) turkey sandwich I order consistently. It's boring (to order the same thing), but I always come with different people."

Repeat customers like Morales and Smith, as well as solid food reviews, help Hob Nob compete against franchises and chains.

"This isn't pre-made, pre-fat food," Jeff said, pointing to a glass case filled with frosted treats and Danish pastries. "We don't throw it at you and say, 'Here you go.' Cakes and muffins are made from scratch.

"We bake everything here," Tania chimed in. "Our payroll is a little bit higher. We're not opening from cans. Everything has to be prepped."

Quality carries a hefty price tag. The cost of flour, once \$12, skyrocketed to \$32 within the last year, and oil has doubled, factors that anyone interested in a career as a restaurateur should consider, Tania said.

"Do research on the location and the quality of food you're going to serve," she added. "Make sure you have the right people. It's more than a full-time job, and it's not easy."

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