

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

By Claud Mann

Recently someone referred to me as “an Ojai old-timer.” This gave me a chuckle—aside from feeling a tad younger than an “old-timer” of any stripe, changes are happening at such a pace around here that lately I’m starting to feel like a newcomer in a town I’ve called home for 26 years.

Our family stumbled into the Ojai Valley; we had no intention of moving here. We knew little about the area, and were lured by some scheming locals who knew that my wife, Perla, and I were on the lookout for something affordable with good public schools to raise a family. To be nice, we agreed to look at a tiny house on Fox Street they told us about. It was right across from a car wash we would soon discover never seemed to close. (And let’s be honest: Washing your car at 3am means you’re probably cleaning up a crime scene).

The man who owned the rental house, an overly fit Eastern European, said, “I don’t do credit checks and don’t want a security deposit. I also don’t like to fix things. If you’re handy and agree not to call me all the time, it’s yours for six hundred bucks a month.”

We loaded Eva into her stroller and took a walk to discuss the pros and cons of moving to the middle of nowhere without a reliable car or regular income. Then we saw Libbey Park and went back to get the keys to the house.

For me, one of the great things about moving somewhere new is discovering the food scene. This didn’t take long in downtown Ojai. Standouts were Bonnie Lu’s, Boccali’s, Sea Fresh, Casa de Lago, Ojai Coffee Roasting, O-Hi Frostie (now Ojai Business Center), Jim and Rob’s (at the old location), Carrows (now Beacon Coffee), The Firebird (now a pharmacy), Diaz Bakery (now Sage), Plaza Pantry (now a real estate office), Nora’s (now Pinyon), Tottenham Court (now Monte Grappa), Bill Baker’s (now The Dutchess—after 20 years as Azu), L’Auberge (now Nocciola), Café Emporium (now Help of Ojai), Suzanne’s (still vacant), Go Fish (Now Ojai Rotie—after 20 years as Knead Bakery) and, of course, Los Caporales (now Harvest Moon). Like most places, Ojai’s restaurant landscape changes more often than the CDC’s COVID guidelines.

We soon discovered that in this small town, going out for a meal was not just about what you wanted to eat, but also how you wanted to feel and the people you wanted to visit with. Our first breakfast was at Bonnie Lu’s.

The owner sat right down at our table take to our order, saw us wrestling with a squirmy child and said, “Give me that baby.”

We obediently handed Eva off to the energetic blonde with a sparkly smile and fire-engine-red lipstick named Jenny (Dohrn-Newell), who continued chatting with customers and running food with our little girl balanced happily on her hip. Eva took to Jenny right away, and a few years later, it was Jenny who led her by the hand into the back to yank her first loose tooth with a promise of post-extraction ice cream. Once Eva learned to write, Jenny let her wait tables, just as she had done with her own daughters.

Bonnie Lu’s felt like home to us. Jenny’s bear-sized brother, Niles (AKA Bubba), ran the kitchen while somehow still spending most of his time in the dining room, greeting and hugging everyone in sight. One glance at his apron and you could guess the daily specials. Niles was all heart; you could taste it in the food he made and feel it in how much he relished cooking for virtually the whole town. While waiting for breakfast, he would sometimes slip us a “monkey bowl” of soup to try if he was happy with it.

If there was a local benefit or a fundraiser for a friend or neighbor in need, he could be counted on to prepare

food for an army. Cooking alongside Niles for some of these events was a real joy for me. I can still hear his operatic laugh that carried from the kitchen to the street. Niles Dohrn was one of the good ones and left us far too soon.

Like Bonnie Lu's, Los Caporales was a restaurant that exemplified the etymology of the word restaurant (from the French, meaning to restore or refresh). If a person was ever in need of a little restoration—and Leticia Salinas' impeccably prepared family recipes, along with her husband Ruben's warmth and endless stories, didn't do the trick, perhaps what was required was help of a more clinical nature.

"Los Cap" was also a true family venture. Laura, Liz and Ruben Jr. grudgingly worked alongside their parents, practicing musical instruments and doing homework in between restaurant side work. After eating there regularly for several years, we sensed we were finally being accepted into the fold after being invited to join their after-hours Rosca de Reyes celebration on 3-Kings Day. Traditionally on January 6, a tiny baby doll (representing Baby Jesus) is hidden in a wreath-shaped sweet bread called a rosca. Mexican custom dictates that whoever finds the doll must make tamales for another party in February. (I'm guessing the date of the second party can be flexible depending on dental appointments made after biting into a small chunk of Jesus-shaped plastic during the first.) Leticia's Jalisco-influenced regional cooking was pure love, and her Carne en Su Jugo that she named Nectar de los dioses (Nectar of the Gods) still calls my name on wintry nights.

Bill Baker's Bakery was still going strong when we moved to town. It was founded in the early 1920s by a German immigrant baker named Wilhelm "Bill" Koch. Bill is credited with being the first to make Ojai famous with his wheat-free lima bean bread reputed to prevent allergies, hypertension and digestive disorders (making today's aggressive gluten-free movement nothing new). At its peak, Bill Baker's shipped 10,000 lima loaves weekly throughout the U.S. According to Ojai's town historian, the late Dave Mason, Presidents Hoover, Coolidge and Roosevelt served Bill's famed fruit cake at White House functions. A photo of his thousand-pound cake designed for the 1939 World Exposition, featuring replicas of all 21 California missions, hangs in Jim and Rob's Fresh Grill today.

Many decades later, a collection of retired ranchers and tradespeople—some of whom knew Bill as children—gathered daily in Bill Baker's side room well before dawn, usually before the arrival of the morning baker. (Eventually the manager gave them their own key to come in and start the coffee.)

At 70-something, retired plumber AC Barnett was one of the bakery group's youngest. If you asked him whether he had been fishing recently, his go-to reply was, "Nope. Not since this morning." Coming home after a trip once, Perla discovered a package of AC's coveted home-smoked fish in our fridge with a note saying, "See what happens when you don't lock your door?" Our family got to know AC after buying his beat-up Wolf stove. He sold it strictly "as-is", but little-by-little AC began to oversee the stove's restoration until it looked like it belonged in the lineup of a classic car show. Once AC and I became friends, he said I might want to meet the bakery guys, so I made it a point to stop in occasionally if I awoke painfully early. The first morning I showed up, a jockey-sized Santa Paula upholsterer named Danny casually slipped me a hand-carved box to admire. I should have known it was a newbie initiation prank when everyone got quiet. I opened it and screamed like a scared schoolgirl as 180 volts from a flash capacitor shot through my arm. It was almost worth losing the use of my right hand for a week to see how much it made the old guys laugh ... almost.

Guys of that generation might not admit it, but I think theirs was an old-school men's support group. For years, long before daylight, these pals sat together in the warmth of the bakery, nibbling German pastry, helping each other navigate the mysteries of loss, change and largemouth bass fishing.

Inevitably, as years passed, the group dwindled. The last time I stopped in, more than a decade ago, it was down to two. No storytelling or practical jokes, just a couple of old-timers drinking coffee, quietly watching through the big window as Ojai started a new day.

After two long years of COVID restrictions, I'm starting to think the vague longing I'm not able to shake stems from the loss of this natural therapy that the bakery guys took for granted. And if craving something as simple as sitting around a table with friends, drinking coffee and discussing the stuff life throws at us makes me an old-timer, then save me a seat at the table.