

THE SCENE SETTER

The Scene Setter: Gus's Barbecue



Stefano Paltera / For The Times

The 62-year-old dining institution gets an extreme makeover courtesy of new owners Chris and John Bicos

By Jessica Gelt, Times Staff Writer
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LASTING 60 years is no small feat for a restaurant, especially in and around Los Angeles, where the fever of unchecked reinvention burns white-hot. That's why when brothers Chris and John Bicos bought [Gus's Barbecue](#) -- a casual dining institution in South Pasadena -- they were careful to tip their hats to its rich history.

"Gus's has been around since 1946 and the people of Pasadena have an emotional connection to it," Chris said last week at the restaurant's first "friends and family" dinner. "It's important to us to cherish the history and move it forward."

When the Bicos brothers -- whose father opened Pasadena's Original Tops restaurant on Colorado Boulevard in 1952 -- finalized their purchase of Gus's from the namesake's extended family last October, they inherited nearly five boxes of memorabilia, including a slew of old black-and-white photos (some of Gus himself standing proudly by the front door).

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Today, those photos -- lovingly framed and hung all over the restaurant -- as well as a series of vintage neon signs are all that remain to document the historic look of the once-grungy, down-home diner. Smudged red booths have been replaced by demure light sage-colored ones and well-worn carpet has been replaced by dark wood floors. The formerly divey bar is now backed by galvanized steel and peppered with flat-screen TVs, and a giant commissioned painting of bluesman Robert Johnson graces the back wall.

The food also received an extreme makeover. The Bicos say that despite the implications of Gus's classic neon sign -- which has been recognized by the [Museum of Neon Art](#) and spells out "Bar-B-Q" in giant letters -- the original Gus's focused more on diner food, like ham steak with pineapple and tuna melts, than on barbecue.

"When you see that sign at night and it's lit up and screaming barbecue, that's what you want when you come in," says John. To that end, the brothers installed two smokers, one hickory and one apple wood, and an up-to-date rotisserie to crisp their signature herbed chicken.

The menu of barbecue reads like a best-of list from around the country. Memphis-style baby back ribs, St. Louis spare ribs, beer-braised Texas brisket and Carolina-style pulled pork are all served with two home-style sides. The red skin potato salad and creamed corn are particularly flavorful and complement each other nicely when served alongside the crispy Southern fried chicken.

With the aid of consulting chef J.P. Amateau, the Bicos created two varieties of barbecue sauce, original and spicy, which are in pots on every table, as well as a series of house-made marinades and dry rubs.

The three agree that the pulled pork -- which is marinated in sugar and spices for 24 hours, cooked in a 225-degree oven for 10 hours and regularly wet-mopped with vinegar, brown sugar and chili flakes -- is their favorite menu item.

Will this frenzy of barbecue bring back Gus's regulars despite the radically changed interior? Chris Bicos thinks so.

"Growing up with a family-owned business, we know how important it is to know your customers by name and to be that small organization that can change quickly," he says. "We're here every day and we're gonna be here every day." 808 Fair Oaks Ave., (626) 799-3251