

Memphis Business Journal

Friday, February 8, 2008

Cafe engineers

Partners sketched plans to rescue Hollywood Cafe, plan to grow eatery as Tunica grows

Memphis Business Journal - by [Michael Sheffield](#)

After 36 years as engineers, Michael Young and John Almond, both senior vice presidents at **Allen & Hoshall**, thought they knew what a hard job was -- until they went into the restaurant business.

"Compared to running a restaurant, engineering's a piece of cake," Young says.

Young and Almond have known every owner and manager of the Hollywood Cafe in Tunica since 1969. Both men spent a good portion of their college days at the cafe, so they had a great affinity for it. They loved the restaurant so much that in 2006 they bought it.

Young says the previous operator was in bad health and the restaurant needed serious renovations. If it closed at the time, it wouldn't have reopened.

"They were very gracious to sell us the land, building and the name, and we made a lot of renovations and bought new equipment for the kitchen," Young says.

Young and Almond invested nearly \$315,000 in the restaurant, including the renovations and equipment improvements. They say they will have to invest another \$75,000 for a planned expansion of the kitchen and a new roof. Since they've taken over, the restaurant's annual revenues are about \$350,000.

"It's doing OK, but we want to get stable," Young says. "Revenue is a matter of getting more people through the door."

The Hollywood Cafe got its start in Hollywood, Miss., a town located five miles south of the current Tunica site. The cafe was originally a stagecoach stop and hotel on the way to New Orleans, and got its name from a grove of holly trees in the city.

Almond says the original owner had an antique store, which his son turned into a bar. Eventually, they started cooking meals and it became a restaurant. The restaurant is widely recognized as the home of the fried dill pickle.

As a child, Almond says the family would bring couches and chairs from the antique store for customers to sit in. The original Hollywood Cafe burned down in 1983 after the owners left a heater on. A stack of Cyprus timber caught fire and the restaurant was destroyed. The current location was previously a commissary, and Almond says the owners at the time, Sterling Owen and Bob Hall, wanted a place for their band to play in on weekends, so the Hollywood was reborn.



ALAN HOWELL | MBJ

John Almond, left, and Michael Young have kept the storied Hollywood Cafe alive.

[View Larger](#)

"They kept the name because everyone knew it, and the restaurant hasn't closed since," Almond says.

While it doesn't have the flash or exclusivity of restaurants in the Tunica casinos, Hollywood Cafe has its fair share of stories and celebrity appearances. The cafe has also been immortalized in Marc Cohn's song, "Walking in Memphis," which refers to "catfish on the table and Muriel on the piano."

Muriel Wilkins, a musician from Helena, Ark., would come to the restaurant and play piano every weekend. One weekend, Cohn, who on the advice of some friends came to the restaurant during a tour of Memphis, met Wilkins and the song was born.

A photo of Cohn and Wilkins is on a wall of the restaurant, and the piano is still there as well. Hollywood Cafe also has been featured in John Grisham's novels and has played host to ZZ Top and Michael Jackson. **AT&T** held a press conference there last October to present a \$500,000 check to B.B. King's foundation for the construction of King's Indianola, Miss., museum. That night, during King's show at his Memphis nightclub, he mentioned the restaurant.

"He said he hadn't been in a place like this in a long time and that we treated him real nice," Almond says. "You can't buy a better endorsement than that."

Matthew Dunn, a regular and partner with Tunica National Properties, says the Hollywood Cafe has almost as much history as the Mississippi Delta, and Young and Almond's Tunica connections made their ownership of the cafe make sense.

"They've been very instrumental in the growth of Tunica County. They built the water system here, so it is nice to see them investing in Tunica County," Dunn says. "The place is really well run with a great atmosphere, and has picked up a lot since Mike and John took over. It's an off the beaten path you can go for lunch or dinner."

The restaurant's clientele includes tourists on tours, construction crews from current projects going on in Tunica and casino employees looking to get out of their environments for a while, Young says. Its location in the middle of the residential development going on in Tunica could mean new business as Tunica's population continues to grow. Young and Almond also don't rule out expanding the restaurant, since they own the 1.6 acres it sits on.

The partners are proudest of the fact that the Hollywood has survived over the years and should be a staple in Tunica in the future.

"There's so much history, it would have been a tragedy for the doors to close for good," Young says. "We're just getting it to where we want it to be, but there's still work to do. If you have a good time here, tell your friends, but if you have a bad time here, tell me."

The Hollywood Cafe

Owners: Michael Young and John Almond

Address: 1585 Old Commerce Road

Phone: (662) 363-1225

Web site: www.thehollywoodcafe.com

mshffield@bizjournals.com | 259-1722