

A Valentine for Hatch



By David Salcido

If you've lived in or traveled through southern New Mexico over the last decade and a half, you're no doubt already familiar with Sparky's, the award-winning burger emporium in Hatch. Even if you're one of those rare types who haven't stopped in for a bite, you will have noticed the many examples of vintage memorabilia littering the landscape on both sides of the road at the corner of Franklin and Hall Street. The couple behind both the restaurant and the memorabilia are Teako and Josie Nunn who opened Sparky's during the summer of 2008.

The Nunns latest project, however, is sure to bring just as much excitement to the bucolic village as the original did. For the past eighteen years, Teako has been slowly bringing a vintage roadside diner back to life, while Josie handles the aesthetics of color and style. In August of this year, they will reveal it to the public. The diner, an original "Little Chef" from the Valentine Lunch System, was built in 1949, and purchased by Teako "sometime around 2006." The Nunns' loving restoration will result in yet another roadside attraction for visiting tourists.

The history of the Valentine Diner is entwined with the history of expansion in the American West, and with it, the American

dream. After World War II, an enterprising young fellow named Arthur Valentine, who had worked for a hotel supply company that manufactured prefabricated mail order diners, went into business for himself. Unlike other existing companies, his concentration was on the states west of the Mississippi. The new Interstate Highway System beginning to flourish there created the necessary momentum.

Creating small diners that could be run by two people, the Valentine diners came complete with grill, counter and eight to ten stools. Once it was unloaded and placed on a cement slab, or bricks at each corner, it just had to be plugged in and it was ready to go. The Nunns' diner is 8 feet by 30 feet and is completely self-contained, even down to the restroom, which can be accessed from the outside of the building. Built in 1949 in Hutchison, Kansas, it was loaded onto a flatbed and transported out west.

"I found it in a warehouse in El Paso, 18 years or so ago, owned by a guy who buys and sells antique cars," Teako said. "He had purchased it years before from somewhere in Fabens, Texas, but had lost interest in it. It was dusty, but it hadn't been vandalized or anything. All the glass was good, the door opened and closed, it looked like everything was original. I didn't really know at the

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Local entrepreneurs Teako and Josie Nunn rebuild an American dream ✨

me, but it was a rare find. It even has all four of the wings on the sides, which never happens. As they get moved, over and over again, they tend to lose them. We got lucky. I ended up trading him an antique jukebox, a muscle car and some cash for it." The purchase made, Teako began restoration on the diner right away. A new roof and paint job was a start, as was rewiring to bring it up to code. Light fixtures and an air conditioner and heater were added. Josie picked out the tile for the floor and was able to track down the original Formica for the counter. The stools were replated, and new seats created using another original material found by Josie. The rest is still being assembled, but only authentic items are under consideration.

"The pie cases are original. I have an old juke machine that I want to put in. I've got an old top hat neon that I want to hang in the window. I've got a cash register from the 30s that I'll put on the counter." Teako said, reeling off the list excitedly. "I also have an old jukebox, from 1948, that will play old 78s from the time. I want it to be completely authentic."

Now sitting in its new home in the lot on the southeast corner of Franklin and Hill Street, across from B&E Burritos, renovations continue. The plan is to have a nowplace for tourists to visit, though Tea-

ko hasn't decided whether or not to open the kitchen. Even so, he's hoping people will stop by to check out his progress.

"I'm going to have the gate open while we're working on it, so people can come in and take pictures and stuff," he said.

Just as with Sparky's, the décor will extend beyond the building itself. "I want to put a couple of old gas pumps in," said Teako. "I've got an old Phillips 66 pump, 39 model, that's period correct. It's out of the 1930s. I won't restore them. I want them to look like they've been here a while. I'll probably put in a couple of old cars out front. Then I'll put in an old wooden fence, just to frame it. Of course, I'll probably end up hanging old signs on it. I'm trying to recreate what I always look for when I travel."

So far, a name hasn't been decided upon, but Teako has a few ideas he's throwing around. "I don't have a name for it yet, but I want something legit. Something soft and catchy, but I haven't figured out what it will be yet. Something classy. I want it to flow like butter."

In essence, the diner is an homage to the chasing of that illusive American dream, as imagined by creative thinkers a cen-



ture ago. Teako and Josie Nunn, creative thinkers themselves, are proponents of keeping that history alive, while adding to the already piquant flavor of the village they call home.

"People will know it's something special, even if they don't recognize its authenticity," Teako said. "It will be a legitimate roadside attraction. To me, it's an art project. Really, what is it? A piece of Americana. It really is art, to me."



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