

COVER STORY

Legends of a landmark

Wunsche Bros. Cafe celebrates 100-year history in Old Town Spring

By **DAI HUYNH**
Houston Chronicle

At Wunsche Bros. Cafe in Old Town Spring, proprietor Scott Mitchell weaved a tale of two brothers.

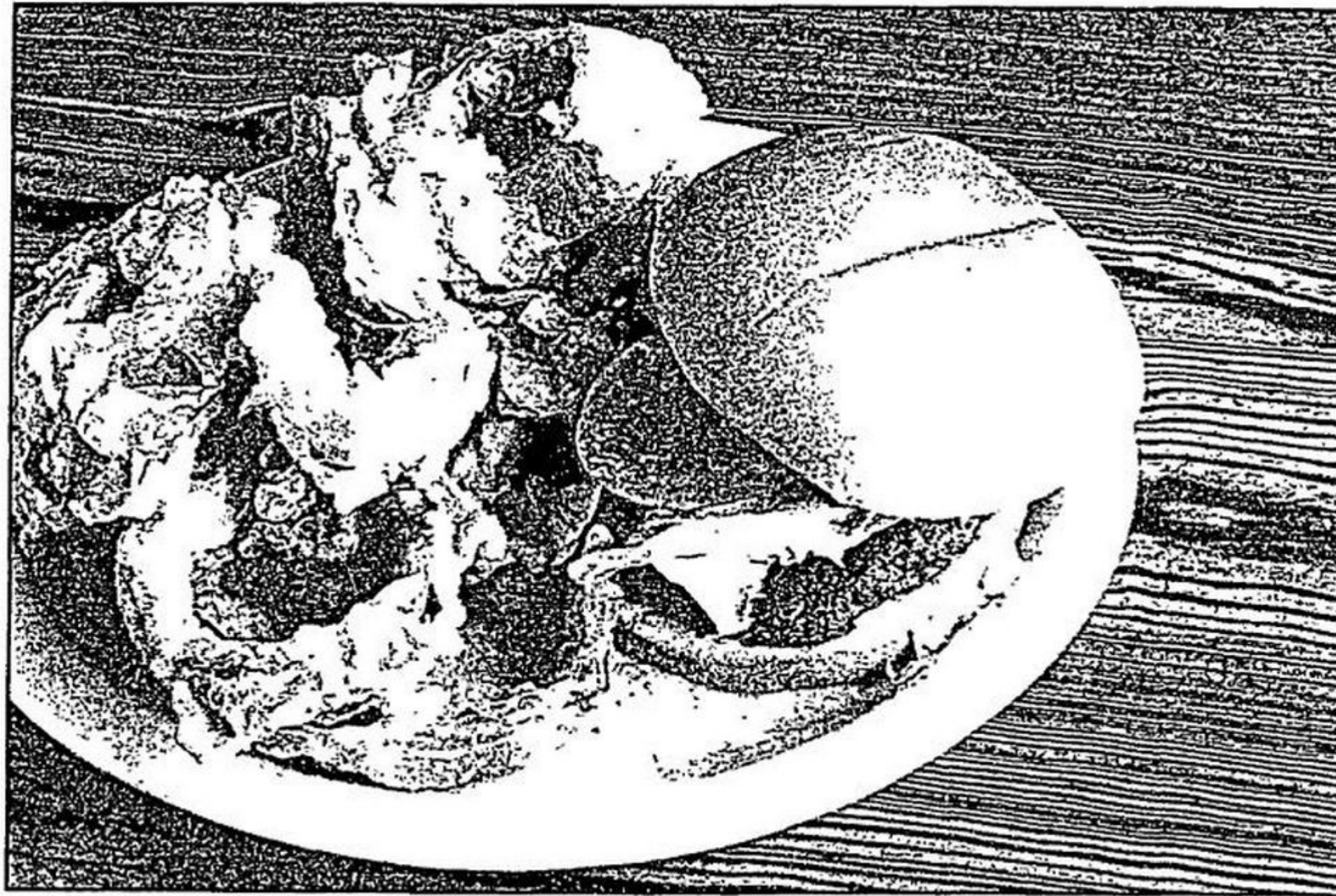
"We've got a couple of ghosts in the barn. They're pretty famous, Dell and Charlie," he said.

Mitchell doesn't hesitate telling customers about the illustrious Wunsche brothers. They're central in the colorful history of the former Western saloon he and his wife, Brenda, restored in 1982.

If it weren't for Dell and Charlie, Wunsche Bros. Cafe wouldn't exist. The Mitchells wouldn't be celebrating the cafe's 100th anniversary this year. And historical Old Town Spring, 20 miles north of downtown Houston, might not have boomed and flourished into a tree-shaded, white-fenced village with more than 200 boutiques.

Shopkeepers quip that their town was built on a hamburger. The tale started in 1902, when Dell and Charlie Wunsche built the Wunsche Bros. Hotel and Saloon to accommodate railroad workers and travelers. Their business thrived until Prohibition.

Afterward, the Wunsche brothers rented the building to various businesses. Most quietly faded away until Viola Burke leased the property in 1949 and opened the Spring Cafe.



Steve Campbell / Chronicle

A hamburger order is a long-standing tradition at Wunsche Bros. Cafe in Old Town Spring.

She served hamburgers, hand-formed from freshly ground beef from a butcher shop across the street.

"She would buy two or three

pounds of hamburger at a time. She never wanted to overbuy," said town historian Margaret Smith, who wrote *Spring Through the Seasons. Stories of*

a Texas Town (Eakin Press, \$21.95).

Not that Burke's trade wasn't thriving. Old-timers remember lining up out the door for her fa-

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Margaret Smith,
town historian

mous inch-thick burgers. Railroad workers routinely slowed their train to a crawl to load up on burgers.

The Spring Cafe was well known for its hamburgers and laid-back service

"It bragged the biggest, juiciest burger with the slowest service in the whole country," Brenda Mitchell said. "Whenever the orders stacked up, the cook would slow down. He just didn't want to be that busy."

Customers were willing to wait 30 minutes to an hour for their burgers. One day, an enterprising couple noted the line of people that stretched around the block in front of the Spring Cafe. A light bulb switched on. The intrepid entrepreneurs opened an antiques/gift shop where customers could kill time while waiting for a table.

"The effort was contagious," Smith said. "One little shop opened after another. Old Town Spring grew and grew, all because of a hamburger."

In 1981, Scott and Brenda Mitchell fell in love over the cafe's flat-grilled hamburgers and ice-cold beers. A year later, the Wunsche family asked the couple to consider buying and restoring the building.

The structure, the oldest in Spring, had become structurally unsound, just short of total dilapidation.

"But we were suckers for these old walls," said Brenda Mitchell, touching the faded-green pine.

Scott, an architect and home-builder, and son of developer George Mitchell, couldn't resist the challenge of restoring the historic building as authentically as possible.

"I had no interest in being in the restaurant business — zero. But I had a passion for old buildings and wood," he said.

Six months later, in October 1983, Wunsche Bros. Cafe & Saloon started flipping hamburgers and something else: Texas-size chicken-fried steak with a crisp, puffy greaseless crust and cream gravy.

"It's my mom's recipe. She told me how to make good cream gravy. It's all in the drippings," said Brenda Mitchell, who grew up in Smithville, baking pies with her German-Czech grandmother.

Mitchell was also taught to make sausage sauerkraut balls, coated with beer batter and fried golden brown. Traditionally, they arrive with sour cream. But regulars often request ranch dressing.

Customer Jean Kosmin likes the warm sausage sauerkraut balls crumbled on a crisp, cold green salad with sweet red onions and blue-cheese-ranch dressing.



Karen Warren / Chronicle

Food and music are a successful combination at Wunsche Bros. Cafe., where a crowd gathers for singer-songwriter Hayes Carll's performance on the tiny stage. Carll will be a featured performer at the building's 100th birthday celebration Oct. 19, opening for Guy Clark.

"Oh, and don't forget the beer bread," she said. "People go there just for that. It reminds me of stuff Grammy used to make"

Everybody has a Wunsche favorite, and the restaurant offers plenty of country-fried choices. Still, the hamburger remains the No. 1 seller. The restaurant sells about 1,300 burgers weekly, managing partner Sherry Sinisi said.

Burgers come with seasoned skins-on fries. They're good, but

they pale in comparison to the onion rings. Cut from sweet Texas 1015s and dipped in beer batter, these giant golden treats are truly lord of the rings.

Homemade desserts are numbingly rich, and sweet. But perhaps none is as legendary as the chocolate whiskey cake, supposedly created by Dell and Charlie Wunsche the night before Prohibition.

Food and music go together at

Wunsche. The restaurant has been a stepping stone for such Texas talents as Clint Black and Lyle Lovett. The Wunsche Bros. Cafe performance last Friday night was a homecoming for Hayes Carll, who grew up in The Woodlands, right down the street from the Mitchells.

He was known as Josh Carll back then, so Brenda Mitchell didn't realize she had booked the neighbor boy who spent a lot of

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Scott Mitchell, owner

time in her kitchen testing her pastries.

She was pleasantly surprised at this Texas singer-songwriter's musicianship — not to mention his sense of humor.

"Growing up, I remember Clint Black and his brothers playing here," Carll said from the stage. "And I remember thinking if I ever played Wunsche Brothers, I would have arrived. . . And I have T-shirts and CDs for sale."

Carll will be back for the 100th-year celebration weekend Oct. 18-20.

On Oct. 18, Kimmie Rhodes will perform with Darcie Deaville. On Oct. 19, Guy Clark will take center stage with Carll, Jeff Plankenhorn and Gurf Murlix opening.

On Sept. 13, Wunsche's Centennial Music Series will showcase Bob Schneider in an acoustic show.

For information on the concert series, call the cafe at 281-350-1902.

Tickets for Clark's show are available through Ticketmaster, 713-629-3700

■ Wunsche Bros. Cafe: 103 Midway, Spring

Hours: 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Mondays, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesdays-Wednesdays, 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays and 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Sundays

Cost: Appetizers \$2.95-\$9.95, sandwiches \$4.95-\$6.95, entrees \$6.50-\$8.25, desserts \$2-\$3.95