



The great Kahiki closed in 2000 and was razed to make way for a Walgreen's. Nearly 500 people flew in from as far as London, Melbourne and San Francisco for the farewell party that featured live music and lots of food. We had a grand time. Sail on!

MARCH 15, 1998--

COLUMBUS, Ohio The Sunday brunch was winding down at the Kahiki Supper Club, a surreal compound of Polynesian food, drink and high jinks on the east side of this otherwise normal city.

A 7-year-old boy had fallen behind the sophisticated stride of his parents. He stood alone at the front of the canoelike structure, watching a tall smoking fountain emit Gardner Mc Rays. The kid was full of wonder.

That kid was me.

When I was his age my parents also took me to the Kahiki, not for the mahi-mahi

almondine, but for the cascading waterfalls framed by glorious tiki gods, the falling rainfall every half hour and war chants and steel drum rhythms that spin through intimate bamboo huts.

I'm 42. And I'm still impressed.

On my recent visit to the Kahiki, it was amazing to see how kids remain in awe of the restaurant, which in December was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The federal government agency cited the Kahiki's "rich Polynesian culture, architectural design and influence on national and local restaurant history."

The Kahiki (which means "Sail to Tahiti") was built in 1961. It has maintained a steady and colorful course despite the onslaught of music videos, video games and Dennis Rodman (which means "Macademia nut").

"There's a mystique in Polynesian culture," says Kahiki President Michael Tsao, who has owned the restaurant for 20 years. "It's not exposed to the general public in the United States. It's atmosphere, food and fun. But the main thing is the fun.

"You find a paradise in Columbus."

Before coming to the Kahiki, Tsao was general manager of Trader Vic's in Beverly Hills, Calif. Tsao, 48, points out, "The main thing is the fun. And this (tiki bar) fun is not achievable in any other place because today everyone is into high-tech, computerized fun. This is natural, cultural fun."

I love tiki bars. I have a fun tiki bar in my basement. The Kahiki's tiny Polynesian server with a grass skirt and a black eye even sold me the gift shop's Aloha! banner for an unbeatable \$5.

The Hala Kahiki, 2834 N. River in west suburban River Grove, is the Chicago area's best tiki tavern. And it's tough to beat the Tonga Restaurant & Hurricane Bar in the basement of the Fairmont Hotel, 950 Mason in San Francisco, where a live tiki trio plays Top 40 music on a pool of water, accompanied by falling rain, thunder and lightning.

But there's nothing like the Kahiki.

The Kahiki's menu features a map and directions on how to get around the 20,000-square-foot restaurant: "Starting counterclockwise in the entrance is the Grand Foyer, the Cloak Room, the Beachcomber (gift) Shop, the Outrigger Bar, entrance to the

Village Dining Room, Maui Lounge, access to the Rest Rooms and stairway to the (basement) party rooms. . . .

"Going into the Village Dining Room (with more than 1,000 tropical fish living in an aquarium that lines the east wall), the Music Bar to your left, Kalakua Street, the Molokai Hut, the Kauai Garden Booths, around to the Niihau Hut, Rain Forest Booths and back to the Music Bar." Whew. The boat like building is a regular Noah's Ark for party animals.

And that doesn't include Sam, a 16-year-old blue and gold macaw that watches over the Outrigger Bar from his expansive cage. It's tempting to lean back from the bar, stick the tip of your index finger inside the cage and wiggle it at Sam. "Watch out," says a bartender in a Hawaiian shirt and an orange lei. "Sam's got chirpies . . . and canarial disease." And the bartender hasn't even been drinking.

Back in 1995, a customer hid in the Kahiki compound after the restaurant closed. He stole Sam. The macaw knows only a few words: "Hello," "What, no tip?" and "Help." The birdnapper was caught only after he sold Sam to a local pet store. Sam learned the word "Dumb." Sam now has a microchip in his chest with pertinent identification information.

The Kahiki, 3583 E. Broad, was designed by the late Coburn Morgan, a painter, decorator and sculptor with degrees in electrical engineering and architecture. The place is rich in Polynesian detail, right down to the bathroom faucets, which are made from armadillo shells. The bathroom basins are giant Tridacara clam shells.

The restaurant's inverse curved roof, which peaks at 60 feet in height, celebrates the design found on many New Guinea war canoes that purportedly repels evil spirits.

You can even taste a kick of the Kahiki without traveling to Columbus. In 1993 a public offering of the Kahiki's common stock was made through Diversified Capital Markets. Proceeds from the stock issue were used to expand the company's wholesale distribution business, and last year the Kahiki struck a deal with Dominick's that allows them to service all Asian food in the food store's kitchens throughout the Chicago area.

When I was a kid in Columbus, celebrities such as Raymond Burr, Gig Young and Arthur Godfrey hung out at the Kahiki. An autographed picture of late comic Paul Lynde used to hang in the Outrigger Bar.

These days a new generation sips from the Kahiki charms. The popular lounge band

Combustible Edison loves the Kahiki so much that members are planning a May residency in the restaurant's Maui Lounge. On Saturday nights, Ohio State students fill the Outrigger Bar. And every weekend the Hawaiian Tropic Band steel drum, guitar and bass trio performs while strolling through the Kahiki's bars and dining rooms.

"We took the celebrity pictures down," says restaurant manager Theang Ngo. "They're in our office upstairs. Sometimes a bartender would make a drink, the stuff would splash up and get the pictures dirty. We replaced them (with a tropical wall mural). But if a customer requests to see the pictures, we'll take them to the office."

Ngo, 25, is from Phnom Penh, Kampuchea (known as Cambodia before 1976). At age 14 he moved to Columbus from a Cambodian refugee camp. Ngo lost his parents, a brother and a sister in the Vietnam War. A friend brought Ngo to the Kahiki, and in five years he has worked his way through the ranks from busboy to waiter to restaurant manager.

Ngo peers out into the foyer at a huge tiki god with a fiery red mouth, glaring green eyes and water bubbling from the top of its head. "The tiki god is a symbol for all the tribes to respect and worship," says Ngo, as a "Mystery Girl" walks by, carrying a birthday cake, pounding a drum and singing "Happy Birthday" in Hawaiian.

"There is also a 'Mystery Drink' on the menu," he says. "When someone orders it, the Mystery Girl bows to the drink at the command of a gong. Then they deliver the drink to the customer. It's fun."

After some serious questioning, Ngo discloses the "Mystery Drink" consists of rum, vodka and tropical juice.

More than 120 people work at the Kahiki, including natives of China, the Dominican Republic, Germany, Italy, Korea, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Russia and Venezuela. "It is a melting pot," Tsao says. "A diversity of culture. They all end up at the Kahiki because of our uniqueness."