

The final dinner bell: Longtime Bucktown institution, Johnnie's to serve last meal today after 31 years in newly gentrified neighborhood

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You get the sense entering Johnnie's Snack Shop in Bucktown that the place has been around for a while.

The diner sits in a parking lot beneath the L tracks on a fairly quiet stretch of the 1700 block of North Milwaukee. The walls are sparsely decorated with watercolors and family photos. From outside the clouded windows, it's hard to imagine that much of anything goes on inside the tiny, white brick building.

The shop's name, Johnnie's Snack Shop, is misleading, unless your idea of a snack includes stuffed peppers, spaghetti and pepper steak.

Not for long, though. Johnnie's serves up its final snacks today. A banner above the counter reads, "Thank you for being with us for 31 years." Owners of an Italian beef sandwich shop hope to take its place.

Johnnie's has survived Bucktown's crime, gentrification and challenges from nearby fast-food outlets. In a good year, the shop turned a profit of roughly \$45,000. And while expenses rose, revenues were flat.

What really convinced Gus and Georgia Stoes to close up shop is that after 31 years of often 100-hour workweeks, they're tired.

"By the time I go home, I'm like a dead [man]," the 68-year-old Stoes said. "So tired."

Gus Stoes (pronounced stows), Johnnie's gruff, wiry Greek-born owner, lugged deliveries in one recent morning wearing a white apron, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. Two customers shouted jokingly, "Hey Gus, you late!"

Stoes' son Tom, 19, operated the cash register in a black T-shirt that warned, "Harassing me about smoking may be hazardous to your health." A second son, Dimitrios, 21, also helps out.

The job of waiting tables is up for grabs, and includes Georgia, who is also from Greece and speaks little English, a part-time waitress and an old family friend who takes orders voluntarily.

Stoes' only gear is high. He unloads the dishwasher like it's a life-or-death challenge, and he barks out orders in a mix of Greek and English in a voice most people reserve for shouting matches. (A one-line description of Johnnie's on Metromix.com reads, "Hours: 'Early to late,' grumbled the grizzled guy behind the counter when asked.") There's no espresso machine, but the mixed, mainly blue-collar clientele are treated well. Serving portions become increasingly larger the more frequently customers eat at Johnnie's.

"He's going a hundred miles an hour every day, every second," said David Leander, a regular at Johnnie's. "He likes to feed people."

For some, the owner himself has been the main draw. One customer appears tired, and Stoes asks, "Long night?" as he makes a drinking gesture. If he gets an order wrong -- he never writes anything down -- he'll toss in a pound of bacon and a jug of orange juice as an apology. He sends clients off with "Take it easy," one of his few complete English phrases.

Gus and Georgia rise at 3:30 a.m. at their Oak Lawn home each day to open Johnnie's by 5 a.m. Gus typically puts in 15 hours, while Georgia leaves earlier.

Stoes was introduced to hard labor early in life. He grew up in Greece on a farm that he inherited at the age of 14. At 33 he moved to the U.S., and four years later bought the business for \$4,000, acquiring the property in 1979 for \$33,000.

The shop has been busiest on the weekend, when the staff would frantically serve brunch to a couple hundred people. This process was eased by the fact that so many regulars were automatically served the same order, and what Stoes lacked in English he made up in gusto.

"I mean, [he'll] yell at his own family, who's helping, but then turn around and flash a smile at you, and always say something sarcastic," Leander said.

Stoes said the best part of his job has been his customers. The worst, working nearly 100-hour weeks.

Paula Barrington, executive director of the Wicker Park and Bucktown Chamber of Commerce, lamented, "It's sad to lose those [mom- and-pops] because they helped to establish business in the neighborhood, weathered the changes and are part of the neighborhood's character and history."

Development has been feverish further south on Milwaukee, but until recently, not much has happened in the other direction. Today, Barrington senses some change, and points to a home accessories store and a spa that recently took root on Milwaukee near Johnnie's.

When asked what she plans to do now, Georgia shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "Relax."

With two sons in college, the Stoes won't be relocating to their homeland quite yet. First, they'll close the door at Johnnie's, and for Gus, a vacation to Greece will have to do.

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THEN AND NOW:

Like some of the decor, the prices at Johnnie's Snack Shop haven't changed much since Gus and Georgia Stoes opened in 1975.

Item 1975 2006

Coffee .20 .80

Coke .20 .70

Hamburger .70 1.50

with fries 1.20 2.25

Ital. sausage .95 2.40

Italian beef 1.90 4.50

Spaghetti with meatballs

1.85 5.00

Pepper steak or stuffed peppers with vegetables

2.25 5.00

3 eggs with hash browns

.90 3.00

3 eggs with ham, bacon or sausage 1.80 3.50

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