

Feb. 29, 2004-----

SIKESTON, Mo. -- I have been to Paris once. It was during a honeymoon on the Ile Saint-Louis. My wife and I stayed in a little white hotel on the banks of the Seine River. After an afternoon of sightseeing, we returned to the hotel only to find our bed had not been made. I called the front desk and requested fresh linens. Several minutes later there was a knock on the door. I opened it.

A hotel employee threw the sheets across the room.

My wife screamed. I ducked. (We got divorced six years later.)

Hey, you don't have to go all the way to Paris to get treated like this.

The original Lambert's Cafe is at the junction of Interstate 55 and I-57 at Sikeston in rural Missouri. Every day a server walks through the restaurant pushing a cart of 72 hot rolls. If you request a roll, he will throw one at you. No one screams. No one ducks. Everyone is happy. That's why Lambert's Cafe is America's "Only Home of Thrown Rolls."

Lambert's manager Jerry Johnson figures his restaurant throws 580 dozen rolls a day. The rolls are thrown between 10:30 a.m. and 9 p.m. All roll throwers wear vinyl gloves. Customers do not wear catcher's mitts. "People are surprised when they first come in," Johnson says during a lunch break on a winter afternoon. "Sometimes they're offended until they figure out what's going on. They think we're being rude."

Lambert's has a big, friendly roadhouse feel. The restaurant is finished in fine pine, and Steve Earle's "Nowhere Road" and Booker T. & the MGs' "Green Onions" are playing in the background as I roll in. This is a marked improvement from the Shakey's Pizza-inspired Danny Davis & the Nashville Brass that used to groove in the background.

Norman Lambert was the son of founders Earl and Agnes Lambert. Norman died in 1996 at the age of 62. He started the roll routine in 1976 in Sikeston. Lambert would walk around the restaurant and hand out rolls, but one afternoon the cafe was packed. An impatient customer yelled, "Throw the damn thing!"

Lambert was quite a character. He collected mule art. He liked to quote William Faulkner's *The Reivers*, in which the Mississippi author ranked animal intelligence. Faulkner placed rats in first place, mules second, cats third and dogs fourth. Mules were always first in Lambert's heart. Much of his mule collection hangs in the restaurant. I sat in a booth by a Ross Perot poster of a donkey and an elephant hoisting a beer while toasting "A Man for All Parties."

Lambert's parents were from Alabama. They opened the first Lambert's Cafe in 1942 on South Main Street in Sikeston. It consisted of a nine-stool counter and eight tables and seated 34 people. The present Sikeston operation opened in 1988. It is the third different cafe to be built on the site. It seats 300 and includes a colorful gift shop.

Johnson, 32, grew up in the Lambert family. He and his twin brother, Jeff, were hired on the same day. Johnson was 15 and he began his career busing tables. Jeff is now the manager of the Lambert's Cafe in Ozark, Mo. The Johnson brothers were reared in Benton, Mo., about 15 miles north of Sikeston.

A third Lambert's Cafe is in Foley, Ala., and there are plans to open a fourth store in Nashville, Tenn. That makes sense. Willie Nelson, Charlie Daniels and Martina McBride drop by Lambert's when they are rolling down I-55 or I-57. (McBride is partial to the beans and cornbread.) Elvis Presley ate at the original Lambert's. "Every year during the first week of August they have a big PRCA Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association rodeo in town with a star every night," Johnson says. "Elvis was at one of them back in the '50s."

Lambert's is a full-service restaurant. The house specialty is soul food-inspired chicken and dumplings (with two vegetables on the side for \$10.25). The fried catfish fillets (with two vegetables for \$13.25) aren't bad either.

Having traveled I-55 zillions of time, I've concluded Sikeston is where North becomes South. This may be why I have never heard of sugar-cured hog jowl (sliced a quarter-inch thick off a hog's jaw). It has a richer taste than bacon. Lambert's also serves lots of sorghum (molasses).

Before diners place their orders, servers work the room with complimentary sorghum (for the rolls), fried potatoes, okra, macaroni, tomatoes and black-eyed peas. Using her best Ozark drawl, my waitress Liz Morrison tells me, "Don't turn nothin' down but your collar."

The restaurant was nearly full on a Tuesday afternoon. I guessed about 240 people were at Lambert's, and I was floored by the speed and efficiency of the service. Besides complimentary appetizers, I had golden fried chicken with turnip greens and homemade mashed potatoes. The chicken was superbly seasoned and moist on the inside. I ordered, ate and finished my lunch in less than 40 minutes. I can't even get in and out of my local Mickey D's that fast on a Tuesday afternoon.

Morrison explains, "On a busy day we have two- and three-hour waits outside. We'll have 30 cooks in the kitchen. Everybody has their own job. There's the prep cook, the cook, the fryer cook, the line cook. Everyone has to work together."

The Lambert's waitstaff wears red bow ties with bright red suspenders and big smiles. They can spot a ringer a mile away. Not long after I sit down, I hear Morrison whisper to a colleague, "He's new." She later tells me she met Norman Lambert when he was basketball and football coach at Sikeston Senior High School. Morrison has worked at the restaurant for 11 years. "Mr. Lambert was the best," she says. "He didn't meet a stranger."

Although Norman Lambert has been gone for several years, his free spirit still defines the restaurant. He established a policy for people in wheelchairs, declaring that "if you bring your own chair, you eat free."

That policy remains today.

Another time a roll thrower named Joe Denny was moving north to Effingham, Ill., where he applied for a job at Cracker Barrel. He asked Lambert for a letter of recommendation. Lambert wrote, "To Whom It May Concern: Joe Denny, Damn Good! Norman Lambert."

Johnson says, "What we live by here is short-term loan, long-term gain. If you give people a little bit more, you'll get it back in the end."

Lambert's Cafe should franchise to Paris.