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ATLANTA, Ill.---Fans of Route 66 are so benevolent that when the historic Palms Grill Cafe reopened a couple of months ago in uptown Atlanta (pop. 1,649), the diner was besieged with ideas about how to decorate the place with vintage Mother Road signage and car photos.

Thanks, but no thanks.

The Palms opened in 1934 and such ambiance wouldn't have existed during its glory days.

The Palms served blue plate specials, dealt bingo games and held weekly dances in the backroom. It was also a Greyhound bus stop; if you wanted to catch a ride, you flipped the switch on the bottom of the diner's 11-foot-long neon sign. The dawgs soon smelled a faster way up and down I-55. The Palms closed in 1968.

The detailed integrity of the new Palms Grill Cafe comes from Bill Thomas, who is almost single-handedly establishing Atlanta as the state's top Route 66 tourist destination.

In 2004 Thomas helped relocate a 19-foot Paul Bunyan fiberglass statue from a Cicero, Ill. hot dog stand to Atlanta, about a half-hour south of Bloomington. The statue is across the street from "the Grill," as locals call it. Thomas also brought the "Letterheads," a free-spirited group of sign painters from across the country, to paint retro murals in town.

Thomas, 55, is CEO of Teleologic Learning Company, which makes online training programs for the U.S. government and military. The company's headquarters are two doors down from the Grill.

But of all of Thomas' projects, the Palms Grill Cafe takes the cake -- or at least one of the homemade pies that were on deck during my recent visit. The Grill serves up apple, blueberry, cherry, peach, rhubarb, boysenberry and sour cream raisin pies. I had a scrumptious, ample piece of red raspberry pie for \$2.95.

The pies are made by Lumi Bekteshi, who moved to Atlanta from Albania in 1996.

Thomas taught Bekteshi how to make pies. He's taught pie baking at Heartland Community College in Bloomington since 2004.

"She was a baker already," Thomas said during an afternoon conversation at the Grill. "She makes a mean baklava with phyllo dough, honey and nuts. She picked

pie making up right away."

Lumi and her husband, Nick, operate the Country Aire, the only other restaurant in Atlanta. Nick's family owned the restaurant before Lumi came to America. The couple also rent and manage the Grill. The building is owned by the Atlanta Public Library District, where Thomas serves as treasurer.

Lunch is the busiest time at the Grill.

Big Band music from the 1930s and '40s plays throughout the sparkling cafe. Daily specials include homemade chicken filet sandwiches and Swiss steak on Monday, meat loaf on Tuesday. Dinners are popular on Friday and Saturday. You can wash the grub down with a cold bottle of Route 66 root beer, black cherry or cream soda (\$2.15) from Wilmington, Ill.

Since it reopened, locals have flocked to the Grill to share their stories.

"People in town said they not only came here to eat but came because the bus stop was here," Thomas said. "High school kids would wait for the bus because it delivered the prom flowers from Lincoln. There wasn't a florist in town during the 1940s. Lots of people got on the bus to go shopping in Bloomington."

The restaurant originally was opened by Atlanta resident Robert Adams after he toured California in a dance band. Adams loved the palm trees he saw in southern California so he named his restaurant the Palms Grill. He insisted a live palm tree be included in the interior decor, a tradition that continues today.

Heavyweight boxing champion Max Baer -- father of Jethro from "The Beverly Hillbillies" -- has been the biggest celebrity to hit the Grill.

"Just a few weeks after he earned the title he was going to a theatrical engagement from Chicago to St. Louis," Thomas reported. "He was with three other people. They ate and he stayed in the car and slept. The food was so good they woke him up. He had a slice of coconut cream pie and a glass of milk. It was 1934, the height of the Depression. He tipped everybody in the place a dollar. It made the front page of the local newspaper."

Baer was the Johnny Depp of his time.

The Grill's red brick facade building went up in 1867. It was a grocery store and bank before becoming a diner. The front dining room seats about 38 people. Strangers quickly become friends. Eleven black stools line the diner counter, a replica of the original black and white marble top. The back area seats about 50. The forest green and blue neon sign pays homage to the original sign.

The restoration process began in 2003. The Grill made it on the National Register of Historic Places in 2004 and \$500,000 in funds were raised to help renovate it.

Thomas obtained financing from Atlanta residents, the Illinois Bureau of Tourism and the National Park Service's Route 66 Corridor Preservation Project.

"To get money from the state you have to prove you're going to create jobs," Thomas said. The Grill employs a cook, a dishwasher, two full-time servers and three part-time servers.

"Even though it's only been open a couple of months, the Grill is already one of our major attractions," said Patty Ambrose, executive director of the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway. "It's off the interstate and just as easy to access as a fast-food restaurant. And you have a totally different experience. You have home-cooked meals, you're stepping back into a slower pace where the waitress calls you 'honey.' "

When reconstruction work began, each of the original bricks from 1867 had to be taken down and cleaned by hand before being put back up. "That's what the National Register wanted us to do," Thomas said.

The hard work has paid off.

"This is one of the best tourist seasons we have had," he added, saying that visits to Atlanta are up about 20 percent over last year. "I don't know if it is more Illinois folks staying close, but we still get lots of Europeans. We had people coming to Atlanta in February. That's never happened."

It's because the world is in the Palms of your hand at this quaint landmark.