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COLUMBUS, Ohio--The Chef-O-Nette restaurant in the Upper Arlington suburb of Columbus is an American classic. Its charm can be attributed to the triumvirate of 1960s architecture, comfort food and a name that is obviously free of focus groups.

The restaurant with squiggly Formica tables and surfboard-shaped chandeliers is on the west side of the Tremont Shopping Center. All 16 stores in the mid-20th century limestone center are independently owned. There is not a chain operation in sight.

So there are a few real good things already going on here.

But as you wait for a table at the Chef-O-Nette, an older regular strolls in. The help behind the counter always asks, "How ya doin' today?" And the regular always doffs his baseball cap and replies, "I'm on the green side."

How great is that?

This Middle American nature of Columbus has always struck a chord with me. I try not to think it's because I lived in Upper Arlington between 1958 and 1966. I know I would feel this way if it was my first visit to Columbus.

Columbus is America's crossroads.

When we lived in Upper Arlington, the greater Columbus area was known as "Test City, U.S.A." Chicago-based meatpacker Swift & Co. transferred my father to Columbus when I was 3 years old. It's easy to over-romanticize the 1960s, but the truth is that the innards of Columbus haven't changed since we left. In the fancier Chicago suburbs, developers are talking about "tear-downs." Our old house on North Star Road still has a one-car garage with a one-car driveway.

Many years ago I was interviewing Jerry Mathers and Tony Dow about "Leave It to Beaver." I remarked how the television series reminded me of my years in Columbus. Dow said the show's writers (Joe Connelly and Bob Mosher) were from the Columbus area.

"The things that happened in Columbus almost happened by accident," explains Daniel Hershberger, president of the Society for Commercial Archeology. Hershberger is a transportation researcher at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The society held its national conference in Columbus a few years ago. Hershberger recalls, "The conference was titled 'Made in Ohio.' The question always was, 'Why Columbus?' And the answer is that it is the middle slice of Middle America.

"Many fast food prototype restaurants are test-marketed in Columbus, partly because it sits geographically within a certain distribution pattern of population. But you hit the nail on the head with 'Leave It to Beaver.' This was a pretty vanilla 1960s suburban existence. Columbus literally has the best of things, and that averages out with the worst

of things. The example of that is the Kahiki Restaurant [Detours, March 15, 1998]. The Kahiki was one of the best Polynesian restaurants in the country, one of the first to be on the National Register of Historic Places, and that would be when the needle swings to the good side. When the needle swings to the bad side is that they've torn down the Kahiki. And they built a big box drug store [called Walgreens]. Columbus is a city of averages.

"And in its averageness, it becomes special."

This is a good time for America to discover Columbus.

The Chef-O-Nette was built in 1955.

The restaurant is only on its third owner, Harlan Howard.

He is not related to the Country Music Hall of Fame songwriter, Harlan Howard ("I Fall to Pieces," "Heartaches by the Number"), who passed away earlier this year. But as a fan of 1950s country music and 1950s restaurants, I was as happier than a tick on a dog while talking to Harlan Howard at the Chef-O-Nette.

In 1970 Harlan's father, Maborn, purchased the Chef-O-Nette from previous owners James "Jim" Reid and Chuck Zollinger. During the 1950s and '60s Reid and Zollinger operated a popular Columbus carhop restaurant called . . . Jim Chucks.

How Columbus.

Maborn retired in 1994, handing the restaurant off to his son. "Mrs. McKinley [the wife of the original owner] used to come here right up until she passed a few years ago," Howard says. He is sitting in the paneled Chef-O-Nette dining room, accented by a 1950s satellite clock and lime green candles in gold wall candleholders. Howard says, "I never asked her how the [restaurant] name came about. But I knew her and her husband traveled to France quite a bit. They got the dream of opening a restaurant over there. And I know she is the one who named it."

The Howards have made just one interior change at the Chef-O-Nette In 1983 Maborn warmed up the front part of the restaurant with geometric lattice and mirrors. "The biggest obstacle we have is not wanting to change the design, but keeping the design fresh," Howard explains. "That's a big job. There's a lot of work in cleaning the Formica



tops. It would be a lot easier to replace those with stainless steel where you just wipe and swipe and go on. But we want to keep the look it has."

The Chef-O-Nette has 24 vintage Formica tables and two Formica counters that have 11 chairs at each counter. Students from the College of Art at Ohio State University in Columbus make regular field trips to the restaurant. Among the first things you see when you walk into the front of the Chef-O-Nette are the twinkling surfboard-shaped 1950s chandeliers that hang from the ceiling. "We actually made the ones in the dining room to match the ones out front," says Howard, 43. "They are made from hammer handles and pot pan lids. My grandfather was a machinist. He made the round brass coupler to screw on the hammer handles."

Howard hires teenagers from the community for his waitstaff. They abide by a modest dress code. Any host must wear a creased white shirt and tie; hostesses must wear nice blouses, skirts or dress slacks.

The Chef-O-Nette still has a drive-through for all kinds of orders, not just fast food. "That drive through is possibly one of the first drive-throughs in the country," Howard says. "One of the major chains is advertising themselves as being the first drive-through, but this predates any McDonald's, Wendy's or Burger King."

I've recently been returning to Columbus about once a year. I always try to eat at the Chef-O-Nette. The restaurant always has two daily lunch specials and two dinner specials. The Chef-O-Nette is known for its Hangover Special sandwich, a slice of ham hanging over a cheeseburger deluxe (\$2.05), and do not miss the homemade beef stew.

The stew is served in an oval bowl that resembles one of the Chef-O-Nette chandeliers. The stew consists of butter beans, corn, peas, carrots, green beans and celery. The beef is cooked in small tiny cubes as opposed to the mansize chunks you see around Chicago. For dinner, the tender stew is served with coleslaw, roll and butter, and foil-wrapped baked potato on the side (\$5.10). Everything at the Chef-O-Nette including the french fries, is prepared with 100 percent vegetable shortening.

Chef-O-Nette celebrity customers are not the Jennifer Lopez/P. Diddy types. Golfing legend Jack Nicklaus is from Upper Arlington (he got his "Golden Bear" nickname from Upper Arlington High School) and he still eats at the Chef-O-Nette with his family. Late Ohio State basketball coach Fred Taylor was a Chef-O-Nette regular, and legendary Ohio State football coach Woody Hayes had three great-nieces who worked as Chef-O-Nette servers.

When I see the rest of the Tremont Shopping Center, I am always amazed at the lack of tenant turnover. Many businesses like the Tremont Goodie Shop are still in business, dating back to when we left town 36 years ago. "I'm not smart enough to understand it all," Howard says. "But I think being individually owned has a lot to do with it. We don't even have a dry cleaners here that is a chain. We all have a stake in the community. And we get terrific support from the community."