

INDUSTRY LEGEND

Carlos Anderson's restaurant revolution

BY JIM BUDD
The Herald Mexico

Amazingly, no one yet has written a biography of Carlos Anderson. I know, because I have been trying to track down information about the man. From the Internet I learned several people around the world are using his name, but for anyone in Mexico there is — or was — only one Carlos Anderson.

In case you just drifted in from another planet, I refer here to the Carlos of Carlos 'n Charlies,' the man who revolutionized the restaurant business in Mexico.

Really. Carlos Anderson had that golden touch.

About 40 years ago (this is where I need a reliable biography), while a student at the old Mexico City College, this Carlos Anderson obtained the concession to operate a cafeteria on the campus, a place he called Si Como No. It became so popular that undergraduates and even professors tended to linger and forget about attending classes. The concession was revoked.

Perhaps in a snit, perhaps because someone offered him a job, Carlos Anderson turned up during 1962 in Mazatlan as manager of the restaurant at the Hotel La Siesta. He managed, with the help of Chuy Juárez, to buy the place (the restaurant, not the hotel) and changed the name to El Shrimp Bucket. They made it an especially friendly kind of place where a customer was welcomed back on a second visit as if he were a regular patron.

Usually he then became a regular patron, at least while still in town. Since La Siesta is a hotel on the beach, most of the patrons were tourists. Along with congeniality, El Shrimp Bucket always served good food. True, with shrimp it is hard to go wrong, but El Shrimp Bucket served more than just shrimp. Fajitas, ribs and "oink-moo-peep" (pork, beef and chicken) tacos were among the specialties.

Mazatlan was a different place then, as was, of course, all of Mexico. Outside of Acapulco, Mazatlan was the only big international vacation destination in the country. Back in 1962, there were no international airlines flying into Acapulco, but Aeroméxico flew to Mazatlan from El Paso, Mexicana from Los Angeles. Trains came in regularly from the border. By car the trip took as much as three days, especially if you were hauling a trailer, but if you planned to stay for the winter, three days was not so bad.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF COMMUNITY.WEBSHOTS.COM

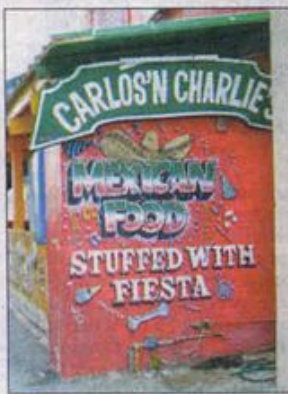
INFORMAL & FUN: At a time when many restaurants in the country were stuffy, Carlos Anderson started the Carlos n' Charlie's chain. Its casual atmosphere is still enjoyed by many people today.

Mazatlan then was more a commercial port than a playground, but sports fishermen crowded in to battle marlin, pensioners lingered on for months and university students flocked down during spring break before anyone knew what "spring break" meant. El Shrimp Bucket was where the foreign crowds gathered. Next came Señor Frog's, which handled the overflow, the crowds grew too noisy at night and might disturb the siestas of guests at La Siesta. In the 1960s, few Mexican vacationers had sampled Mazatlan.

GOING FOR THE BIG BUCKS

No matter. Young and already a success, Carlos Anderson could only look for new worlds to conquer. Ambition brought him back to Mexico City in 1968.

The challenge he faced was a big one. The capital was a smaller metropolis then, and those who worked in offices, not only executives, but also secretaries and clerks, had time to hurry home for lunch. The great and powerful might drop in at a private club. There may have been half a dozen good restaurants on or near Reforma in those days. Jena, Ambassadors, Rivoli and Delmonico's were among them. Anderson heard opportunity calling.



This was 1968, the Year of the Olympics, not to mention other sadly unforgettable events.

Those few restaurants that did exist in 1968 tended to be, shall we say, stuffy. Captains cultivated a frosty air. Even the busboys were haughty.

Waiters served lunch wearing tuxedos, orsmokings, a rather odd gaffe, since such attire is proper only after dark. Atmosphere tended toward quiet elegance. Somewhere I have read that the world's first fine restaurants emerged after the French Revolution when chefs whose masters had lost their heads struggled to earn a living by feeding the bourgeoisie. Clients were treated

with a certain sneering obsequiousness. The tradition lived on in Mexico.

Then Carlos Anderson arrived.

Anderson brought his Mazatlan ways to the Big Enchilada. He wore an apron and appeared to have just stepped out of the kitchen as he personally greeted his customers, treating them like old friends. He had acquired the restaurant that still bears his name on Reforma, and decorated it with carousel horses and old hats stuck on the ceiling. In an era when dining establishments often listed their offerings in French, Anderson's menus featured Mazatlan favorites.

Other places insisted that gentlemen wear jacket and tie if they wished to be seated. Anderson and his crew would offer to hang up jackets on warm days and there are stories that he had pretty ladies running around ready to snip off neckties. I never actually saw that happen.

SUCCESS STORY

What did happen was success. Within months, Carlos Anderson's became the most talked-about eating place in Mexico City. This is not to say the stuffy places faded away, although, come to think about it, the old

ones all are gone. Still, others have taken their place. Les Moustaches and Champs d' Elysée come to mind. But Anderson's keeps on attracting the hungry, customers who want to relax over a meal and order beer instead of wine. Of course, if you want wine, they have that, too.

Charlie Skipsy showed up to join Carlos Anderson in opening the first Carlos 'n Charlie's in Acapulco. Perhaps this is where the boom began. The Anderson touch does well in cities, but it explodes in vacation destinations. First stop for almost everyone in Puerto Vallarta is Carlos O'Brians and no one can claim to have been in Cabo San Lucas and not stopped in at Squid Row. It is hard to think of any place in Mexico where Grupo Anderson has not established a presence. If my Internet information is correct, they have restaurants not only all over Mexico, but in the United States, Europe and South America as well. There are 18 brands now. Some, like Mamá Rosa, I never would recognize as being part of the Anderson Group.

Secret to all this success has something to do with making everyone who works in an Anderson restaurant a part owner. Keeping the customers happy means they will return, and that means more money in everyone's pocket.

Anderson himself made a point of flying around, visiting all his restaurants, dropping in unannounced. He called no staff meetings and supposedly never looked at the books. Instead, he slipped on an apron and took over the chores of a bus boy. He wanted to make sure the customers were happy. If they were, he knew the profits would keep rolling in.

Ever since Anderson arrived in Mexico City, eating habits have changed. Probably it would be an exaggeration to give Carlos the credit for all that, but the fact is, we now have restaurants everywhere. All kinds of restaurants. Carlos Anderson really did seem to have started a trend.

Then he died. He had been successful enough to own his own small plane and small planes seem always to be crashing. This happened several years ago, but, lacking a biography, I cannot tell you exactly when. Maybe for Carlos Anderson it was the best thing. He died young. Old age never would have suited him.

Contact Jim Budd at Fax 5682-6023 or jimmbudd1@aol.com.