

Open Minded *The concept of downtown left-living* By Leslie Wylie

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Fall Fashion Goes To Class

Let's Eat

Dining Guide

Your source for
information on
Knoxville's finest
restaurants

The Greek Century

For much of the 20th century,
Knoxville restaurants were
Greek enterprises

By Gay Lyons

Homegrown restaurateurs Gus Regas,
Mike Connor, Bill Regas and Mike Chase
bring us our favorites

By Frank Cagle



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Mike Connor

Mike Connor grew up in Knoxville, attending St. Joseph's Elementary and Catholic High School. Working at the Jolly Ox, later Steak and Ale, while getting his degree at UT, he decided on a career in the restaurant business. He left Knoxville to manage restaurants in Nashville, Birmingham, Ala. and Chattanooga. He wound up in Dallas, headquarters for the Brinker International restaurant chain. After stints with Brinker and then a chain called Houston's, he was recruited to come home to Knoxville by Bill and Gus Regas. Connor brought Rick Frederico with him and partnered with the Regas family to open the first Grady's Good Times, at Kingston Pike and Papermill Road. Connor, Frederico and Grady Regas ran the restaurant that became a phenomenon. It was packed every night, and sometimes there was a two hour wait to get in.

Randy Burleson, who would go on to open his own restaurants beginning with Aubry's, worked there. He said Connor and Frederico were great business guys, but that Grady provided the Good Times. The Regas mantra had always been to serve hot food hot and the cold food cold and to that Grady's added service with a smile. The plan was to launch the concept as a national restaurant chain. The company opened a half dozen locations and the business did phenomenal numbers. At a restaurant convention in Washington, Connor and Bill Regas ran into Norm Brinker and

talk turned to business. They shared their numbers with Brinker and, after they got back to Knoxville, they got a call. He offered them a nice sum of money and bought them out. The Grady's brand did not fare well nationally. After about 50 locations, the company began to "monkey with the concept," according to Connor, and most of the restaurants have closed.

Connor stayed with Grady's for a time but was under pressure to move to Dallas and the home office. He decided to take his equity stake from the Grady's deal, stay in Knoxville and look around for another concept to develop. The business was going in a lot of different directions; ethnic foods were "hot." But Connor talked to a guy who had three restaurants in Florida that were doing well and about to take off—the guy was opening, of all things, steakhouses—an old-timey idea in the 1990s. But the Outback Steakhouse idea turned out well. Connor looked at the success of other steak house chains but "didn't like the peanuts on the floor" deal. He likes Morton's, but such a high-end tab is not likely to have a large market share in the Knoxville area. So he launched the Chop House concept, high-end food but somewhere between peanuts on the floor and \$100 meals. The mid-priced but quality steak cuts caught on, beginning with the first Chop House at Franklin Square.

Connor operates his eight Chop Houses and two Connor Concepts from nice offices in a development at Turkey Creek, next door to a Connor Concepts. At a computer in his office he can keep a running tab on any of his restaurants. He can call up the

Chop House in the Five Oaks Shopping Center in Sevier County, see how many tables are occupied and what people are ordering today. Menu items are coordinated, via computer, with the supply chain. If a chef is preparing a dish that requires a particular ingredient, when he reaches up above the table that ingredient is sitting there in a bag ready. If it needs to be chopped, it's already chopped, in the bag. Inventory control and making sure that all the ingredients get to the place they need to be makes serving food in several locations possible—it's about efficiency, it's about managing costs and it's about consistency.

Connor's group also operates the 85-year-old Regas restaurant downtown for the Regas family. Connor says Bill Regas came to him and said it would break his heart to close the restaurant and would he assume the responsibility. "It's a labor of love," Connor says. "It has so much history, and I have a tremendous loyalty to Bill."