

NEWS

Old-style Arby's is one of the few left



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AN ARBY'S on Pomona's North Garey Avenue turned 40 this year – but it looks barely a year old.

A tall sign shaped like a ten-gallon hat stands proudly outside, proclaiming its message in neon: “Arby's Roast Beef Sandwich is Delicious.” A less boastful message is in smaller letters: “Drive-Thru.”

Matching the cowboy sign is the rectangular building with a curved roof and overhang, meant to resemble a horse-drawn covered wagon that Western pioneers traveled in.

A broad window covers most of the facade. The patio tables out front are shaded by molded plastic umbrellas, each permanently set at a mod-ish tilt.

In short, the place screams 1960s.

“There are people who come in tour groups and just take pictures of it,” manager Araceli Calderon told me.

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The cramped building can be inconvenient – restrooms and supply rooms can only be reached by going outdoors – but Calderon said: “It’s like a historic piece.”

The Pomona Arby’s is among the earlier locations and longest survivors in the 3,600-restaurant chain that launched in Boardman, Ohio, in 1964.

The Garey restaurant opened shortly after Jan. 6, 1970, the date of its final inspection by the city’s Building Department.

I’m afraid I missed the 40th anniversary, but then, I had been waiting until a warm summer night to take some friends to eat on the patio.

We went one night late in August, but we missed the warm summer night. The temperature was near 60 and required jackets. It might have been warmer in January.

The Arby’s, at 2250 N. Garey, is part of a fast-food mecca on east side of the street. Starting at Arrow Highway and working south, there’s KFC, Sizzler, Arby’s, Taco Bell and McDonald’s. (It might be the unhealthiest block in the Inland Valley.)

Arby’s four competitors have undergone makeovers to add height, play areas or a fresh look. The Arby’s, commendably, is above that.

It says: This is what I am. I have a big corny hat and a chuckwagon shape and you have to walk around to the side to find the restroom. Take me or leave me.

Our group – Canan, Liset, Wendy and myself – decided to take it.

The four of us pulled up in four cars – hey, this is Southern California – and went inside. The interior has three booths and one table. That’s it. The service counter stretches across the width of the building.

Although we liked the rock walls, we were determined to eat outside.

Such items were undreamt-of when brothers Forrest and Leroy Raffel opened their first Arby's – in Boardman, Ohio, just outside Youngstown, on July 23, 1964 – serving only roast beef sandwiches, potato chips and drinks.

According to a corporate history, they wanted to call their restaurant Big Tex, but the name was taken. Instead, the Raffel brothers named the restaurant after themselves, sort of, calling it Arby's, a phonetic version of R.B.'s.

The menu's presentation is glitzier too. I noticed 18 numbered items, each illustrated by a photo.

"They don't have a menu. All they have are pictures. Where are the words?" Wendy whispered.

Even a caveman could order here. Just point and grunt.

We got our sandwiches and curly fries – Arby's touts itself as a curly-fry pioneer – and took a seat outside on the patio.

One other table was occupied, by a couple of guys who weren't eating. In fact, one left on foot and returned with cones from McDonald's.

I guess he didn't want the ice cream treat pictured on an Arby's window poster; a "strawberry banana split shake," described as "the split you can eat with a straw."

The Garey patio is one of the best features. Streetside seating in the Inland Valley is hard to come by. I recommend the view at dusk: the neon burning in the hat sign overhead, headlights switched on as cars whiz by a few feet away, the sun setting behind the vacant supermarket across the street.

We talked about childhood Arby's experiences, argued about whether the Horsey sauce had horseradish and compared the thin-sliced processed roast beef with the Carl Buddig brand.

Canan phoned the 800 number on her receipt and took a short survey to get a free sandwich. Liset did the same. Their confirmation numbers were one digit apart.

We regretted all ordering sandwiches. What if one of us had paid for food, and then another had used that receipt to claim a free sandwich, and then the next person had used that receipt to get a free sandwich...

Lorena, a late arrival, joined us.

"Are they giving out free sandwiches? Or balloons?" she asked.

I explained that Aug. 30 wasn't the actual 40th anniversary and that we were there to celebrate the anniversary in general. She stayed anyway.

The conversation continued. We learned that Lorena and Liset, who are sisters, had recently attended a wedding in Mexico that was also attended by the interim city manager of Bell.

Arby's original location in Ohio is still in operation. The fledgling chain opened its second outlet in 1965, in Akron, and began expanding to other states in 1968, beginning with Pennsylvania and Michigan.

Sometime in 1970, Arby's reached 250 locations. The Arby's that opened that year in Pomona was the first in the Inland Valley.

It must have been popular, because a second Pomona location opened in 1971 at 1175 E. Holt Ave. That Arby's is now King's Teriyaki and still sports the chuckwagon building, but not the ten-gallon hat sign.

Arby's added an average of 50 locations a year nationwide in the 1970s, but not here. A third Arby's, at 599 N. Mountain Ave. in Upland, didn't arrive until 1981. It's still there, but it's got a modern design.

The chain phased out the Conestoga wagon look and the ten-gallon hat in the mid-1970s. Most of the older Arby's have been updated.

The giant hat signs are still found at some older locations that predate more restrictive sign laws, even when the buildings have been changed.

Spokeswoman Kathy Siefert said she doesn't have a count as to how many Arby's still have the Conestoga-wagon shape, "but I can tell you it's only a handful. Under 10."

Under 10?! Pomona is in exclusive company.

How long it will stay that way is unknown. Siefert said the Garey location is company-owned, not a franchise, and that Arby's is spending \$100 million in the next three years to renovate many of its restaurants.

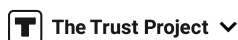
She didn't know of any specific plans to yank the Garey restaurant from the 1960s into the 2010s.

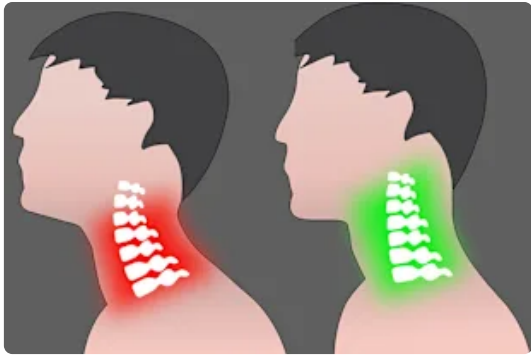
"Please don't touch Pomona," I told her, doing some preemptive pleading. She joked that she'd see what she could do.

It may look outdated, but for some of us, the Garey Avenue Arby's is a welcome wagon.

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