

imbibe

LIQUID CULTURE

HANDCRAFTED
SPECIALTY SMALL-BATCH

WHAT DOES
CRAFT
REALLY MEAN?

microbrew
TRADITIONAL
Local SEASONAL
INDEPENDENT
Artisanal HERITAGE
home-grown
ONE-OF-A-KIND

Tiki's Ohio Ohana

The Kahiki in Columbus, Ohio, was one of the most remarkable tiki bars ever seen. And somehow it managed the neat trick of being both a blatant copy and a true original.

This haute-Polynesian bar and restaurant opened in 1961, founded by a pair of successful steakhouse owners, Lee Henry and Bill Sapp. They thought that Columbus—deep in the Midwest and, at the time they started, deep in the Eisenhower era—could use a dose of exotica.

Henry and Sapp went researching, traveling west to visit Don the Beachcomber in Los Angeles, then to San Francisco to check out Trader Vic's. In 1957, Lee and their chief designer headed to the newly opened Mai Kai in Fort Lauderdale, where—posing as tourists—they took snapshots and pocketed menus. Back in Columbus, the restaurateurs acquired a small bar called the Grass Shack, and used that to figure out how to re-create the food and drink they'd tasted.

Their idea was a brazen rip-off. But what they built on the empty outskirts of town was an American original: one of the most flamboyant tiki destinations in the nation, outrageous enough to eventually draw in icons including Zsa Zsa Gabor, Milton Berle, and newlyweds Claudine Longet and Andy Williams.

The pair invested a million dollars in their dream—an astronomical sum at the time—and mandated that it be large enough to seat 500. Loosely modeled on an outsized New Guinea men's meeting house, the sprawling complex was housed under a single roof and was rivaled only by the Mai Kai for arrant excess.

The Kahiki's mission was evident as you crossed its portal from the parking lot, passing first between a pair of towering (if geographically confused) Easter Island heads flanking the doorway, flames spouting from their heads. You then crossed a low bridge with bamboo railing over a moat with floating flowers to enter a dim, rocky grotto with dripping walls. Passing through a heavy hexagonal door, you left Columbus behind, and entered a tropical Elysium.

Here was the antidote to the lean modernism of the times: it was filled with faux-Polynesian bric-a-brac—palms and skulls and stuffed pelicans and paper lanterns and fishing nets. A small village of thatched-roof dining huts was inside; huts along the outside walls looked into either an aquarium filled with tropical fish, or a "rain forest" where, every 20 minutes, a thunderstorm would erupt and rain would patter down through a tangled faux forest. The center of the soaring central space was dominated by a towering tiki head with glowing red eyes and a fireplace for a mouth.

At this tropical refuge, rigid company men could ditch their narrow ties and don Hawaiian shirts. Here, they were given tacit

permission to loosen up and embrace their inner primitive.

"One of the luckiest places as a young man in Ohio during the '60s was to be sitting across from a beautiful girl at the Kahiki," writes John Fraim, Lee Henry's nephew, and an author of a forthcoming book about the Kahiki. "Both participants [were] in some modern type of alchemical reunion it seemed. But a few of the drinks at the Kahiki in those years would do this to you."



The Kahiki brought South Pacific-inspired design and tropical-style drinks (shown here with bar manager George Ono) to the Midwest.

Ah, yes—the drinks. They were as elaborate as the interior, served in more than 30 different styles of tiki mugs, goblets and volcano bowls, and they had names that read like Graham Greene short stories: Maiden's Prayer, Instant Urge, Malayan Mist and Smoking Eruption.

All bars are in the entertainment business, but none more than the tiki bar—and entertainment was what you got when you ordered the restaurant's bibulous centerpiece, the four-person flaming "Mystery Drink." It appeared after the sounding of a reverberant gong and was

delivered by an exotic, scantily clad "mystery girl" who paused to appease a tiki god before depositing the bowl on the table and draping the recipients with leis. (The menu noted that the ritual "symbolizes an ancient sacrifice, which reportedly stopped volcanoes from erupting.")

In the early '70s, the tiki trend ran aground on shallow shoals, and the Kahiki was sold. Things did not go well. In 1975, the *Columbus Dispatch* reported that five policemen had been bitten by an irate woman one night during a fracas over a dinner check.

In 1978, the Kahiki found temporary salvation when it was purchased by a former Trader Vic's manager named Michael Tsao, who saw the place's potential and restored some of the glamor. But the area around the Kahiki evolved toward the decidedly unglamorous, and the kitchen stumbled in keeping up with modern culinary trends. In 2000, the business was sold to Walgreens, which demolished the Kahiki because Columbus, and the

world, was clamoring for another large, boxy, brightly lit drugstore.

Today, the few remaining palaces of tiki splendor—notably the Mai Kai in Florida—perform a double miracle. They transport you twice: first, to that Polynesian paradise with gentle rainstorms and the promise of primitive promiscuity. But they also transport you to a pre-ironic era, a time when Kennedy was still President and tropical jungles echoed with American victories in the South Pacific, not the withering of American aspirations in Vietnam.

For four decades, the Kahiki drew in people from all walks of life, uniting them around a shared fantasy. As tiki archivist Otto Von Stroheim told a reporter upon the restaurant's sad demise, "Nobody is offended by a luau." **By Wayne Curtis**

Photos of vintage postcards courtesy Jeff Berry