

NEIGHBORHOODNOSH

BY MARY S. GILBERT



The recently renovated Squirrel Hill location—always packed—reflects a 1980s disco theme.

Powerful Pancakes Claim Center Stage

They could be the reason the eyes of the world are on Pittsburgh!

Who would have guessed that the fate of the global economy would be influenced so directly by the hotcakes at Pamela's P&G Diners?

That's putting it a bit strongly, you say?

Consider that presidential candidate Barack Obama *did* rave over the thin, crispy-edged pancakes during an impromptu campaign stop with his wife, Michelle, at the restaurant's Strip District location on primary election day last year, urging his retinue of reporters and photographers to indulge in the crepe-like delights before they left town—and saying he would return someday for more of “the best pancakes I've ever had.”

And consider that President Obama *did* invite diner co-owners Gail Klingensmith and Pamela Cohen to whip up multiple batches of their mouth-watering hotcakes in the White House kitchen during a Memorial Day breakfast for veterans in May.

And consider that President Obama *did* select Pittsburgh as the host site of this month's Summit of the Group of Twenty (G-20) Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors, who will try to restore worldwide financial stability in a time of crisis.

Definitely a cause-and-effect relationship there. Who can blame the President for craving another opportunity to feast upon those irresistible, plate-sized flapjacks?



In 1980, Klingensmith and Cohen purchased Papa Joe's hamburger joint in Squirrel Hill from Cohen's father, Stanford, and converted it into their first restaurant. Since then, legions of devoted and hungry Pamela's fans have been lining the sidewalks outside all six of the diner's outposts for the fabled hotcakes, salads, sandwiches, and more. Locations in Shadyside, Oakland, Millvale, the Strip District, and Mt. Lebanon comprise the rest of the Pamela's mini-empire.

Klingensmith and Cohen were both education professionals when they met through an amateur golf league in 1978. The self-described “morning people” became fast friends, a relationship fostered in part by their mutual love of food and going out

to breakfast. Establishing a restaurant that was open for the early birds was a no-brainer.

“Pam had a recipe in her head for pancakes and needed a venue for them,” Klingensmith recounts. “She's the inventor, the creator. When we opened, Pam began working full time and cooking. I continued to teach and came in to work on weeknights and weekends for a couple of years before joining full time.”

Their success can be attributed largely to the top-secret hotcakes recipe rather than a formal business plan, which they never developed.

“Pam and I built our business one step at a time,” Klingensmith explains. “It's always been a work in progress. The concept of Pamela's P&G Diners is your mother's kitchen, where you feel safe and comfortable in a warm and inviting environment where people actually care.”

While the locations exude an underlying sensibility that identifies them as Pamela's P&G Diners, each features its own unique ambiance. Millvale is decorated like a 1940s diner, while the Strip reflects the 1950s, with family photos on the wall. The avocado, yellow, and orange colors of the Mt. Lebanon restaurant embody the modern tastes of the 1970s, while Oakland and Shadyside are 1970s “hippie-style.” The freshly repainted Squirrel Hill site is like walking into a 1980s disco.

Gail Klingensmith (left) and Pamela Cohen in the White House kitchen last Memorial Day.



Likewise, the menus at each location have dishes common to all of the restaurants, coupled with a few custom items that reflect their surrounding neighborhoods. Among the specialties in the Strip, for instance, are the Tex-Mex omelet stuffed with chorizo, cheddar cheese, and salsa, and the Cuban sandwich, made with fresh pork, ham, Swiss cheese, and dill pickles on a grilled baguette—all in homage to the area's international flair.

“No two menus are exactly alike,” Klingensmith notes. “Everything has evolved, the same as the décor. It's like when you move into a new house and you get new ideas.”

Of course, hotcakes—be they plain or with strawberries, blueberries, bananas, or chocolate chips and bananas—are the signature staple, along with Lyonnaise potatoes, hand-carved ham, and California French toast. Ironically, Cohen's late father preferred the standard-issue fat, fluffy pancakes rather than his daughter's interpretation, so he usually ordered the corned beef hash and eggs.

Klingensmith claims their version of the now-ubiquitous Pittsburgh grilled chicken salad topped with French fries was one of the first in the city.

“For us and our staff, it's like entertaining in your home, which makes sense because your work

is your home away from home,” Klingensmith muses. “Nothing is as frightening as putting a plate in front of a guest,” she continues. “Each time you do you put yourself up for judgment. That's a hard thing to do, but it's rewarding.”

Overlaying the high profile of the Obama family onto that fundamental philosophy makes the risk/benefit ratio of entertaining more pronounced. “Putting a plate down for the president-to-be was both scary and rewarding. Taking it to Washington, D.C. and making it in someone else's kitchen was terrifying,” she laughs.

Cohen and Klingensmith's brush with political fame has instilled a renewed sense of self-awareness and purpose in the pair. The exposure has positively impacted their business, although they are intentionally not trying to capitalize commercially on their good fortune. For one thing, their expanded celebrity has placed them more squarely in the national media's radar. A reporter from the *Wall Street Journal* called to ask their opinion of President Obama's selection of Pittsburgh for the G-20 gathering.

“Pam and I are still recovering from Memorial Day and trying to get a sense of what it all means,” Klingensmith says. “We're so thankful to have been part of the veterans' celebration and to be honored professionally. We've been blessed with what's already happened. Our customers have felt a little bit of ownership with the president because they shared the same food with him.”

“When it's not all about you is when good things happen,” she adds. “President Obama could have had some celebrity chef like Bobbie Flay or Paula Dean make pancakes at the White House, but he picked us. The bottom line is we know that we're just two people and that we're nothing without our staff. We try to provide an environment that's fun, even though it's hard work. We have to keep our focus on our product, customers, and staff, and everything else will take care of itself.”

But if they tinker with that hotcakes recipe, better consult your financial adviser. SA

The three Pamela's in the East End are located at 5527 Walnut Street in Shadyside (412-683-1003); 5813 Forbes Avenue in Squirrel Hill (412-422-9457); and 3703 Forbes Avenue in Oakland (412-683-4066). All are open daily. Hours vary by location.



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