



A time machine: Lincoln's Tastee Inn and Out

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Tastee Inn and Out hasn't changed much since it opened in 1948. A local institution, it's famous for its loose meat sandwiches, onion chips, dip and shakes. The place's charm includes the pneumatic tube that sends orders to the kitchen, the drive-through window that's on the wrong side, the faded old sign out front. And the meat-and-grease aroma inside that evokes generations of memories.

BY COLLEEN KENNEY | Lincoln Journal Star

Billy Langan was riding bikes with a buddy down 48th Street one day in 1948 when he heard a familiar voice call out.

Hey, boys! Come on in!

It was "Jug" Jorgenson, one of the people on Billy's paper route.

Jug was waving from the door of a new drive-in restaurant, Tastee Inn and Out.

Want to try a root beer float?

Billy and his buddy parked their bikes and walked in the door, stepping over big sheets of plate glass workers were about to install in windows. The paint was fresh. Red and white, as he remembers it now.

Inside, the place smelled brand new. The entry was on the west side in those days. You walked in and there was a counter, about eight round stools.

They sat down at one of the new stools.

Tastee Inn was to open the next day, Jug explained. He needed practice with the new ice cream machine.

You're my first customers, Jug told them.

A few days later, Billy was back. This time, he tried what was to become one of the legendary fast-food items of Lincoln: the Tastee sandwich, loose hamburger meat on a bun with mustard and pickles, and the onion chips.

Oh, those onion chips.

In high school at Lincoln Northeast, Billy would pack a bunch of friends like onion chips in his '37 Chevy and take them to Tastee Inn at 48th and Holdrege over the noon hour. He'd drive his dates there, too.

At 15 cents a sandwich, kids could afford it.

Jug was a short, chunky man who liked his bourbon, kept a bottle of it under the counter. He had a red-headed wife.

A few years later, Billy met Nadine, a nursing student. They went on dates to Tastee Inn. They got married. Several times a month, they'd drive their six children to Tastee Inn. Or Billy would go pick up a "tube" of Tastes — six sandwiches for the price of five packed in a cardboard cylinder — and bring them home.

It was a big treat. Families didn't go out to eat much in those days.

Billy goes by Bill now. He's 71, retired from his job as a civilian with the Nebraska National Guard. He and Nadine have been married 52 years.

Since 1948, he guesses, he's eaten at Tastee Inn at least twice a month.

The big sign outside is original. It has little light bulbs and a faded picture of a sandwich.

An arrow under the sandwich points to the little building.

It calls out to the people driving by.

Hey! Come on in!

Bill Langan walks in the door now, and though the place looks a little different — the door's on the east side now and there's a sunroom on the north — so much hasn't changed.

The aroma of meat and deep-fried onions is like an old buddy, and it speeds him back in a time machine to 1948. And, for a moment, he's 14 again.

He and Nadine brought two of their grandkids to Tastee Inn just the other day. They ate Tastee sandwiches and onion chips washed down with pop.

The grandkids love the food.

And Grandpa's stories.

"I've always told my kids and now my grandkids how I was the first customer," Bill says. "They really eat that stuff up. 'Gosh, you must be 100 years old.'"

Generations of Lincolnites have eaten Tastee sandwiches. The place is a local tradition, a local institution.

The drive-through window is on the wrong side. It's awkward. You have to roll down the passenger side window, lean over to pay and take the white paper sacks, shiny in spots because of the grease.

The aroma fills the car and, before you get home, you reach into the sack and grab an onion chip and sandwich for the ride home.

The menu has changed little in over five decades, though you can't buy a tube of Tastes anymore.

"There's only one Tastee," Crystal Ferguson says. "I still go there. I still have cravings for it. It's something that once you try it, you're addicted to them and you have cravings for the darn thing. Kind of like chocolate."

The aroma sends her back in the time machine, too.

It's 1961.

She's a senior at Lincoln Southeast. She and her girlfriends are girls at tables, chatting and laughing. They wear tight straight skirts, girdles underneath. They wore flat ballerina-style shoes. Sweaters.

Girls hardly ever wore jeans or pants.

"We all had the same dorky hairstyles," Crystal says, laughing. "Girls either wore duck tails or it was longer and flipped up on the ends."

The boys wore their hair like Elvis. They wore collared shirts, which had to be tucked into their khaki pants.

In the 1960s and early '70s, she and her husband took their five daughters there often, usually at supper time. It was about the only place they could afford to take their big, young family.

They put pajamas on the girls and piled them into the '58 Bonneville station wagon. They drove up to the window, bought tubes of sandwiches and chips and then headed the drive-in theater at 84th and O to take in a flick.

The girls usually were asleep before the end of the movie.

The theater is no longer there. The kids are all grown. Crystal and her husband have since divorced.

But Tastee Inn is still the same.

“Tastee Inn was kind of a fast-food place before fast food became known as fast food. I really think they were one of the first to have the drive-through window.”

The girls still go there, too, Crystal says. They’re married with kids of their own.

“People would give you the recipe and say, ‘This is the original Tastee recipe.’ But for some reason, when you tried it, it never did seem the same.

“There’s just something about having to go there and get it.”

Laurie McAdams was born in 1954. She and her two sisters grew up between University Place and Havelock.

Her family ate at Tastee Inn about once a week. Her mom worked at the counter, her first job outside the home. Every Sunday at lunchtime, her dad would drive the girls there in the old red station wagon.

The girls liked the Tastees. But their dad, a blue-collar worker all his life, was really crazy about them. He could eat them every day.

Laurie stayed in Lincoln. Her sisters moved to other states. Whenever they return, Laurie always goes with them to Tastee Inn.

“It’s not the most delicious smell you’ve ever smelled. It’s just the memory.

“I can go outside and smell the earth and it takes me back to being a little teeny kid. The same is true about the smell of Tastees, I guess.

“It’s just a part of our family. I think it’s probably part of a lot of Lincoln families.”

Sometimes at the holidays, Laurie orders dozens of Tastees and boxes of chips and vats of dip. She packs them in a Styrofoam cooler with plenty of dry ice and mails them to her sisters.

To Wyoming. To Colorado. To nieces and nephews of the next generation who’ve grown to love them, too.

There’s a photo on Laurie’s refrigerator. It was taken several years ago, at the reception after her father’s funeral:

Laurie and her sisters and her nieces and nephews are sitting around a table, all holding Tastees up in the air.

A toast to him.

Laurie usually just eats there now when her sisters come to town. She’s not crazy about them like her dad was. But every so often, she gets a strange hunger for it. That seems kind of odd to her.

She chuckles.

“Sometimes I wonder if it’s my dad saying, ‘I’m really hungry for Tastees; will you go eat them for me?’”

Old Jug Jorgenson sold Tastee Inn to Ben Murphy in 1972. Ben’s daughter Linda Taylor and her daughter Kristi Cox run the place now.

This past few weeks have been especially busy. It always is around the holidays, she says, when people are back in town.

“They say they have to hit Runza. They have to hit Valentino’s. And they have to hit Tastee Inn.”

What’s Tastee Inn’s secret?

“It’s all homemade,” Linda says. “It’s all from the original recipes from the first owner, Harold Jorgenson. They were his mother’s recipes. They’ve never changed. The only thing already done up for us is the french fries.”

People love the chips and the thick, cheesy dip and the greasy sandwiches the best, she says. Busy days, the place goes through maybe 25 pounds of dip and 100 pounds of hamburger.

Linda and Kristi often see people out front by the big old faded sign, taking photos of it and the building.

Taking photos of their families out front, too.

Then they come in and tell stories of when they used to eat here.

There's this thing on the Internet, Linda says. It's from some guy who used to live in Lincoln. He wrote about all the city's famous old restaurants.

"When it came to Tastee Inn, He's like, 'Oh, my. A home run. The Tastees have never tasted better or greasier. ... Let's say a prayer for Tastee Inn, that it never changes. And that the building never gets a new coat of paint.'"

Come on in!

The time machine works well here. Just like that ice cream machine did that day in 1948 when two boys came in for root beer floats.

"Old Jug, he started quite a deal back then, didn't he?" Bill Langan says.

"And to think it still tastes the same, after all these years."

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