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Century-Old Restaurants Chronicle America's History

INDUSTRY HIGHLIGHTS [\(/INDUSTRY-HIGHLIGHTS\)](#) // [KIRSTEN BALLARD](#) [\(/CATEGORY/AUTHORS/KIRSTEN-BALLARD\)](#) // [SEPTEMBER 2013](#) [\(/CATEGORY/ISSUES/SEPTEMBER-2013\)](#)



McCoole's Red Lion Inn, located in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, opened in 1750.

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Sitting in Win Schuler's in Marshal, Michigan, writer, restaurant critic, and barbecue expert Rick Browne's curiosity was piqued. He'd been there as a kid. The food still tasted good, and the service remained top notch. It's been that way for as long as he can remember.

It turns out that Win Schuler's restaurant was founded in 1909. What followed was a three-year project and countrywide tour to discover and chronicle 100 of the nation's oldest restaurants. Browne identified more than 250 restaurants that were over 100 years old, but he pared that number down to 100 for his cookbook, *A Century of Restaurants*.

"Not just a cookbook, not just a history, it's a travel guide to America and it gives you a very unique look into the restaurants," Browne says.

Of the 100 restaurants, 32 are over 200, and three are over 300 years old. The oldest restaurant mentioned was founded in 1673, and the youngest in 1911. The restaurants range from a burger joint to the finest resorts, and are located in 44 states.

Staying Power

Most restaurants fail within the first 10 years, so what gave these establishments the staying power to last through the years? Browne discovered common threads across the very diverse restaurants.

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“Almost all are family restaurants, they’ve been in the family for years and years, that’s a big part for most of them,” Browne says.

The restaurants have also kept up their quality of food and service. “Part of the secret is people come back wanting the same food—as long as it’s good, they don’t want to change anything. Customers like familiarity, they want it to taste the way they remember,” Browne says. “They want it to taste like when they were a kid.”

Very few restaurants mentioned in the book have modernized with the times. “The formula has worked for 100-plus years; when restaurants change with the flavor of the month, they lose customers.”

Obstacles faced by these establishments were extreme—fires, tornadoes, and floods are common stories among the owners. With 100 years under their belts, the restaurants have seen wars, the Great Depression, and Prohibition. But they also have some great stories.

In Big Horn, Wyoming, at the Bozeman Trail Inn (formerly called the Last Chance Saloon), Browne interviewed the owner and asked “Did anything special happen in the restaurant, like Indian raids? She said nothing like that, but mentioned a writer who was editing a book at the end of the bar.”

The owner couldn’t remember the author’s name, but the title, *A Farewell to Arms*, stuck with her.

Perhaps not that unlike a classic historical novel, Browne’s book tells the history of America through its restaurants.

But more than the “George Washington ate here” stories, what he likes best are surprise discoveries—like the famous guest that frequented McCoole’s Red Lion Inn in Quakertown, Pennsylvania.

At McCoole’s, Browne asked about a patch of floor that had been replaced. “They told me an author came in everyday with his dog, and if his dog was good, he’d get a steak for the dog. After awhile the grease from the steak and the dog clawing the floor left a mark, so they had to replace the floor.”

The author was Erick Knight, making McCoole’s Red Lion Inn perhaps the only restaurant in America that can say “Lassie ate here.”

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Dlw • 9 months ago

I think a vital aspect to add is that the staying power also lies with management/ownership. Oh so many people do not know what they are getting into when they embark in business. They are clueless regarding the time commitment, stamina, hours, financial investment, food and labor cost and relatively low return on investment. Often restaurants do not fail, rather owners throw in the towel.

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I certainly agree with all of the reasons the ownership throws in the towel, but never forget maintaining a quality staff is always the big deal. An owner can always smile at a customer because he understands that one customer could influence many more. A server with a hangover is looking at that customer as a hindrance to getting out of work early. Hiring and training and letting the help realize they are an important part of the viability of the facility means the management is on its toes.

[^](#) [v](#) • [Reply](#) • [Share](#) CJM  Donowonder • 8 months ago

All things shared above are certainly part of it. What about plain old "Hospitality" if you get it and have a passion for providing it ... it comes together.

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