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Old gas stations in the area shift into second gear as eateries

Old gas stations and repair shops in the area shift into second gear as eateries, with one even earning a Bon Appétit seal of approval

By John Austin
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The cars still line up out front, but these days, their owners are in for burgers and beer, not a transmission rebuild.

"Ten years ago there was nothing but warehouses," near the corner where Magnolia Motor Lounge recently opened in the shell of the Vaughan's Transmission Service building, co-investor Stephen Gebran said. "I think we're going to be trendsetters."

The Magnolia might be the first dining spot with grease in its veins in the bustling developments off Seventh Street in Fort Worth, but it's hardly the only one in North Texas. Whether it's Watauga or West Magnolia Avenue, restaurateurs have decided that serving meals where attendants once serviced the motoring public is a gas.

The experts say the old shops are good candidates for the restaurant businesses since they often are in what may still be a high-traffic location and have attached parking.

"Adaptive reuse has played a significant role in the rebirth of American cities" and helped reverse the after-dark ghost-town syndrome that can plague older neighborhoods, said Bijan Youssefzadeh, of the University of Texas at Arlington's architecture school.

Some conversions are so slick that there's nary an oil spot left on the floor. In others, the weathered concrete pump islands still stand out front. Or you can have it both ways, selling gas, magazines and prepackaged fast-food snacks as well as award-winning sit-down cuisine.

Whether proprietors have replaced the packaged peanuts and pumps with wine lists and white tablecloths or just put in paper napkins and plastic forks, patrons can be assured they are backing one of the area's original sources of renewable energy: our appetites.

Here's a look at a six local places where you can pull in and fill 'er up.

Magnolia Motor Lounge

Evidence that it was a transmission shop: An extensive rebuild left only two original walls, so there's not a lot of the old vibe.

The ambience: The MML hooks into its past with the wait staff's uniforms like those that blue-collar service-station employees used to wear -- embroidered name tags on the shirts, for instance -- and a 1931 Ford hot rod in one corner. The interior is a wide-open space with a big-window vista that gives a view of the fast-evolving neighborhood. Seven flat-screen TVs, including a 42-incher over the bar, make it a natural for sports viewing, and a covered patio capitalizes on good weather. Servers use hand-held devices to take orders instead of old-fashioned pads, so they can send a drink order to the bar while they are still on the floor. Speaking of the bar, you've got a choice of 10 draws and 10 bottled brews, and all 10 taps come out of the bed of a 1951 F-100 Ford truck.

There will always be a car of some kind on the floor except on weekends, when the owners will move it outdoors and add live music -- Texas country and rockabilly, to start -- inside, beginning in late October or early November. Also note managing partner Mark Euckert's tough-love policy: "The customer is *not* always right," he says on the restaurant's website. Anyone who has worked in the food biz has to love this.

The food: Naturally there's a car-themed menu. You get Tune Ups instead of appetizers. There's a Little Pistons' Menu with a \$4.89 hot dog with ketchup or mustard for kids. A 52-cent side of jalapeños comes under the Parts Department heading. The \$4.69 O-Rings are Shiner Bock-battered onion rings with ranch dressing. There's a Sunday Drive Salad (\$8.29) or the Magnolia Shop Salad (\$6.72) -- candied pecans, blue cheese and chicken-fried apple-wood-smoked bacon atop a house salad -- and the chocolate cobbler (\$4.89), which is a sort of beefy brownie, served hot. And the perpetual winner: seven kinds of burgers (\$6.72-\$11.79) for the Triple Deuce.

Details: 3005 Morton St., Fort Worth. 817-332-3344; www.mmlbar.com.

Hours: 11 a.m.-12 a.m. Monday-Wednesday; 11 a.m.-2 a.m. Thursday-Saturday.

Winslow's Wine Cafe

Evidence that it was a gas station: The vintage portico is still in place, sheltering guests and valet parking personnel at the corner of Camp Bowie Boulevard and Clover Lane. Inside, there's a black-and-white photo of the station in the 1920s and a copy of a just-published book on the Arlington Heights neighborhood with more documentation of the building's history as a Texaco and a Conoco station.

The ambience: It's as polished as a new Lexus, inside and out. Cool fall evenings make the gas-fired pit on the Clover Lane side of the building a welcome hot spot, and big glass doors that open to let the outdoors in when weather permits are another fine touch. Wine racks have replaced tires, batteries and accessories, but the service is still as attentive as it likely was when the man who wore the star was in charge of your car.

The food: As the name suggests, wine is a priority. Reds go from \$32 to \$250 per bottle, with pinot noirs, zinfandels, merlots and others represented. Whites are \$28 to \$56 per bottle, with by-the-glass selections in both categories. Also there: port by the glass at \$9 and \$15. To soak up vino, try a pie from the wood-fired pizza oven. A 10-inch pizza alla vodka topped with asparagus, cheeses and chicken is \$16. For a lighter bite, there's a cup of creamy tomato soup at \$4. It's a little less rich than some, but that's not necessarily bad. And there's a palpable taste of bacon that you don't find in the competitors. Also worth mentioning: One of the creamiest creme brulees in town, topped with fresh berries, is \$4.

Details: 4101 Camp Bowie Blvd., Fort Worth. 817-731-6515; www.winslowswinecafe.com.

Hours: 5-11 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 5 p.m.-12 a.m. Friday-Saturday; 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Sunday.

Chef Point Cafe

Evidence that it's still a gas station: It sells Conoco gasoline.

The ambience: If you walked in and just looked straight ahead, you'd see the usual gas station/convenience store stuff: candy bars up front, beer in the back. But turn left and there's a large dining area, typically packed with people. Nothing fancy; the waitress calls you "Hon." Especially sensitive visitors may detect smoke from the cooking area, which is not divided from the tables, but it doesn't seem



STAR-TELEGRAM/PAUL MORELEY

The portico above the tables hints at the Ellerbe building's former life as a gas station.

Browse restaurants by cuisine, neighborhood

visitors may detect smoke from the cooking area, which is not divided from the tables, but it doesn't seem to deter most folks. As for why there's an acclaimed restaurant hidden inside, the owners couldn't get a loan to open a restaurant so they secured financing for a gas station and made the dining room part of the package.

The food: It's the selling point. The cafe does chicken-fried steak, but the chef also cranks out a variety of more ambitious fare. The chipotle pesto chicken pizza topped with chipotle sauce, diced chicken and mozzarella cheese comes in two denominations: \$7.99 and \$11.99, and gets nods from the big dudes at the next table. You've also got What Nots mushroom cap appetizers, stuffed with three cheeses, baked in garlic butter, \$6.99; cioppino fish soup, \$14.99; and desserts like the apple flaky pie, \$6.99, made from fresh apples baked in brown sugar and cognac sauce topped with vanilla ice cream. The cafe has tons of accolades and has been featured on CNN. To accommodate even more fans, a big expansion on the back side of the restaurant is supposed to be coming in time for the Super Bowl. When that happens, plans are to quit selling beer to go and start offering it in the restaurant instead. For now, however, no on-premises consumption.

Details: 5901 Watauga Road, Watauga. 817-656-0080; chefpointcafe.org.

Hours: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Sunday.

Ellerbe Fine Foods

Evidence that it was a gas station: the curved portico out front and concrete floors.

The ambience: It doesn't take much imagination to believe you're on vacation someplace a lot more exotic than Fort Worth once you land here. The well-scrubbed alfresco spot in the shade out front is perfect for eyeballing the Magnolia foot traffic and the ladies who lunch. Big galvanized watering tubs full of mint, rosemary and flowers lure hardworking honeybees and lazy diners to the patio, where they can dream away a late lunch, imagining that everything on the near south side is as cool and beautiful as Ellerbe. Even the parking lot is tastefully xeriscaped.

The food: It's too late for you to pretend you discovered it, because *Bon Appétit* magazine beat you to it, tabbing it one of "The 10 Best New Restaurants in America" back in the September edition. And why not? It uses mint grown on the property in its \$4-\$7 homemade mint ice cream. The \$11 (lunch menu) croque monsieur, with cob-smoked ham, béchamel, wild plum syrup, Brazos Valley Swiss cheese and arugula is pretty definitive, as is the \$18 cordon bleu chicken, served with crushed Carter Farm new potatoes, green beans and Miracle tomatoes. Everything, from the bread flown in from San Francisco to the pinkish sea salt, is special, artisanal and otherwise superior in some way. Call it aspirational eating.

Details: 1501 W. Magnolia Ave., Fort Worth. 817-926-3663; www.ellerbefinefoods.com.

Hours: 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 5:30-9 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 5:30-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

Paco and John Mexican Diner

Evidence that it was a gas station: Nothing super distinctive about it, but if memory serves, it was a Shamrock station where the attendants used to sit behind bulletproof glass and mentally plead not to be shot.

The ambience: It sat vacant for what seems like years. Now you can't get a table some days. No big-deal decor inside, but with a trio of wooden picnic tables outside on the shady side of the parking lot, so what? Just take a seat and enjoy. There's traffic on Eighth Avenue, but you're far enough from the street to hear each other chat, provided you *can* talk while you're stuffing yourself.

The food: The salmon torta has to be a signature dish. Slam a nice salmon fillet and a slice of queso blanco in between a couple of slices of soft puffy bread, slather on lettuce, tomato, avocado, sliced onion, jalapeño and "Yucatan-style spices," and you've got \$6.75 worth of lunchtime nirvana. And how about those skinny shoestring french fries topped with paprika or cayenne or whatever it is that gives it that Mexican *je ne sais quoi*? As for the chicken enchiladas (\$7.95), just trust the buzz. Even the beans and rice are five-star. Save room for an order of flan (\$4.95). It's come a long way since the menu choices here were Coke or Pepsi. Speaking of drinks, it's BYOB.

Details: 1116 Eighth Ave., Fort Worth. 817-810-0032; www.pacoandjohn.com.

Hours: 8 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; 5:30-9 p.m. Monday-Saturday; 10 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Saturday.

Del Norte Tacos

Evidence that it was a gas station: Probably the least-altered of our pit stops, this one's a vintage example of the kind of brownish-sandstone construction you see in older neighborhoods and small towns across North Texas. According to the friendly young manager, Del Norte occupies one of the oldest service-station buildings in Godley. The hydraulic lift and overhead garage door tracks are still in place in the dining room, and the wiring runs through aluminum conduits to fluorescent fixtures.

The ambience: Split-oak firewood is stacked chest high on the pitted concrete under the awning, waiting to feed the black smoker. Big fossils are embedded in the exterior walls. Inside, the walls are covered with handwritten menus on brown paper. This is not faux, corporate-does-down-home dining. Though the gasoline is gone, Barnett Shale natural gas business is booming in Godley, where the customers drive dusty work pickups and big tankers roll through Godley's only traffic light. Peppy-sounding *conjunto* music is on the sound system, and the tableware is disposable. No liquor license, but beer is free on Friday and Saturday. If you prefer your own brand, bring it.

The food: Two of Texas' best food groups find conjugal happiness here, as the smoked brisket enchilada plate (\$7.95) hits a bull's-eye of culinary confluence. Pico de gallo, roasted corn and queso fresco and ranchero sauce join the party, proving that there's more than one way to pimp a plate of barbecue. There's also \$2 blackened fish tacos with cilantro and ancho crema or \$3.50 grilled fajitas with sauteed peppers and onions. Both are served on double corn tortillas. If you've got any questions, refer to the menus on the wall, because there's no website.

Details: 101 E. Texas 171, Godley. 817-389-2451.

Hours: 7 a.m.-8 p.m. Monday-Wednesday; 7 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursday-Saturday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday.

John Austin, 817-390-7874



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