

# Texas Travels: A Comparison of Food in Gas Stations and Repurposed Gas Stations from Mississippi and Texas

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In the 20th century, car culture influenced and shaped the way Americans ate. When there were few choices along the road for day trips or long distance hauls, early motorists relied on boxed lunches and picnics. Soon roadside eateries from drive-ins to drive thrus offered food and quick bites to the motorist looking for a place to stop and fill up. Today this gas station or “road” food sometimes sparks fond memories, but it frequently carries negative connotations as in the movie National Lampoon’s *Vacation*, when Clark Griswold tells his son, “I’m so hungry I can eat a sandwich from the gas station.” If National Association of Convenience Store spokesperson Jeff Leonard and the c-store industry get their wish, the joke will soon be over. They hope that in the future, many drivers will leave the pump and pay inside, just to get a glimpse at what the kitchen is making and what choices are on the shelves in fresh and made-to-order items.

Americans are on the go. “Twenty percent of all American meals are eaten in the car and they spend ten percent of their disposable income on fast food every year.” (Unsigned 2014b) Can the gas station convenience store capture this on-the-go customer? Will the average American consumer buy sushi from a gas station? With the explosion of food culture, enthusiastic “foodies” are seeking out food trucks and trailers. Will the next new “hit” move from the truck and be in the gas station? I was curious to explore these questions, and after moving from a smaller populated, small town state (Mississippi) to a large state both in population and area (Texas), I was also interested to compare stores in denser populated regions to those in Mississippi where I had already done research.

## Lay of the Land

Since relocating to Texas, I continue research started at University of Mississippi. While earning a Master of Arts in Southern Studies, I spent a year traveling the state, conducting oral histories for my thesis on Mississippi gas stations, with an emphasis on mom and pop entrepreneurs. Through postcard archives, travel books, maps, and these oral histories, I discovered how communities in the state are changing. Where agriculture once supported many small town economies, main street is no longer thriving and the gas station or country store may be the only place left for residents of an area to get food or meet up for news and gossip. With food profit margins narrowing, many of these businesses are in danger of closing or are boarded up. My original hope of gas stations being the savior of the southern “meat and three,” or at least being able to see this tradition in its “natural habitat,” were soon dashed. Instead, I found that the country kitchens and stores still in business have creative owners who quickly adjust in order to stay in the game and keep people coming in. For example, a few miles outside

University of Southern Mississippi, in Petal, is gas station and corner store, Mak's. Hungry locals search through a haze, where smoking is still allowed and behind a large stack of Pepsis is the hot food. To the left are aisles of bait and tackle in addition to guns and ammo, and on the right, beyond the dining booths, is the typical convenience store inventory.

Down along the Mississippi coast, a favorite of locals and visitors alike is Fayards in Ocean Springs. Similar to Mak's, this small grocery looks like a typical gas station with a canopy and a few pumps in front of a boxy convenience store. Only those in the know would stop to further investigate. Customers choose from franchise fried chicken, bait and tackle, a made-to-order kitchen counter, meat market, and an ice cream parlor. While eating shrimp po boys next to the bait and tackle may not be to everyone's liking, the kitchen and meat market are the draw. On the other side of the state in Centreville, is Vine Brothers, a fourth generation family-owned business, where their unique tagged meat processing brings in hunters from all over and contributes a quick profit uptick over the hunting season for the family business. Since 1980, they boast processing over 120,000 whitetail deer. Unlike other game meat processors where one may get a combination of a number of hunter's kills, customers using Vine Brothers know that the meat they bring in and carry out is from their doe or buck they killed in nearby fields.

Competition among gas stations is heavy. Survival of this type of family business means owners must change and diversify, adjusting to its customer base. Wal-mart's Murphy Oil and Texas chain Buc-ee's have brought the box store model to the corner gas station, making the future of these multi generational businesses grim. Before beginning my research on gas station food, I had not stepped inside a filling station in over a decade. The power of point of sale at the pump had been ingrained in me since my early years of driving. Even while living in California, the state deemed "King of Car Culture," I rarely felt the pull of snacks, drinks, or the miscellaneous items that was just behind the glass door of the office. So how does the corner store entice people to stop, get gas, and mosey on into the store? There are many strategies. My local (and last stop before home) gas station in Oxford, Mississippi used a sign board to place mythical and epic predictions during football seasons, often called the "Freeze report" after Ole Miss's Coach Hugh Freeze. The home team always won on the board. Cars and trucks zipped in and out near this three way stop located on a county road near the edge of the city limits. Although positioned at a busy apex, a contributing factor to the store's activity was that barbecue was sold out of one side of the store and bait and beer was available before heading out to the nearby lake.

Gas stations definitely display regionalism while complying with the standards laid down by large franchises. Similar to "The Freeze Report," one of my favorite signs in Savannah, Georgia was from the 3G (Gas, Goods and Grub) that stated "Now open 25 hours." My friend shared this on social media and commented, "Sorry Savannah, you only get 24." Although there were few historical postcards of gas stations over the years, the social media documentation in this century continues with the many tongue in cheek, play on words titles of stations. My uncle in Arkansas shared a picture of a live chicken at the pumps while fueling. While not exclusive to the region, it's not something one sees every day. During my research phase of my thesis, I vacationed in Key West, Florida for New Year's

where I observed the corner store selling a “cup of luck” (black eyed peas and rice) inside for New Year’s day. Outside, they had an advertisement for a 16 oz coca cola beverage and a fresh Cuban mix sandwich for seven dollars. Both items were not a surprise due to location with the Southern foodways New Years tradition and the state’s large Cuban population.

The trend of kitchens in gas stations is new but so is the repurposing of former gas station buildings. What happens to these structures as a city changes? Gas stations evolved from oil gas shacks to filling stations to convenience stores. Oil companies adjusted to changing regulations and shortages by following trends, from the fall and rise of free maps and full service attention to competition for the cleanest restrooms, to other customer loyalty programs including green stamps and collectable gimmicks. As architecture changed from stations looking like homes (Pure Oil), and roadside attractions (coffee pots, dinosaurs and even igloos and shells) these buildings reflected a changing industry. As cars became more computerized, many stations ceased repair business and reinvented revenue with a convenience store attached. Buildings were often left empty as franchises left regions or oil companies consolidated. In a growing trend, new food and drink establishments are moving into and becoming repurposed gas stations. For example, a Los Angeles corner Starbucks recently opened in an old gas station. The company chose the location/project through its local initiative program to refurbish city and cultural landmarks. Hollywood customers now drive by an art deco coffee drive thru in a repurposed gas station where for years a chain link fence and a boarded up building stood. Just as food trucks can revitalize a community, so can repurposed gas stations. These functioning and repurposed gas stations have great locations where customer traffic is at a premium and history and tradition contribute to customers returning to these locations in both a rural/small town setting (Mississippi) and urban (my current Texas research).

## Changing Trends: Millennials and Fast Casual

The growing tendency of people, especially millennials, to buy groceries in places beyond traditional grocery stores has made the food industry take notice. Whole Foods and Midwest grocery chain Mariano’s cook/prepare food in the store and this has expanded to having mini restaurants or kitchens within the store. Wal-mart continues to experiment with smaller bodega-like stores in cities and has cornered the market on cheap gas under Murphy Oil, a gas company that sits on many Walmart properties. The company now wishes to take on the gas station convenience store with an experimental station in Bentonville, Arkansas that includes what they call a “local butcher/meat market.” While most Murphy Oils on Wal-mart property have canopy and kiosk construction, the Bentonville experimental store looks like the family owned stations in my research.

There are a few winds filled with savory and sweet smells that may soon kick-up a tornado in how Americans eat in the 21st century. Influencing this trend are the millennials. Defined as consumers ages 18-34, they are the largest of six key generational groups. Their influence through social media makes up for any lack of buying power. Success stories in the industry are taking note and adjusting

(Unsigned 2014a). While many articles state the current dining trend is “fast casual,” the case is complicated in that in actuality, consumers are trading up and down from traditional mid-20th century establishments like McDonalds. This trend is a move from the Baby Boomer’s idea of gas station (Clark Griswold) to the millennial’s perception of a convenience store, where it is as much of a destination as the local food trailer or taco truck (Horovitz 2015). This hi-lo mentality is helping feed the fire of what convenience store spokesperson Jeff Leonard hopes will be the growing trend of gas station food (Rosenwald 2013). Those food enthusiasts searching for the best in food truck and trailers will continue by filling up their gas tanks and tummies at the gas station.

This March, U.S. consumers hit a “spending milestone” and so “for the first time on record, Americans were spending as much dining out as [in] traditional grocery stores” (Perry 2015). This statistic is one of a few signals that the recent merger of Kraft and Heinz may be one of survival versus domination. Over the past ten years, traditional grocery stores lost 15% of the market share to farmers markets, dollar stores and convenience stores. Grocery stores have started to shrink in floorspace over the last three years, a sign of the return to the bodega and green grocer (Barclay 2015). Americans’ grocery habits have changed over the years as well. Currently, customers buy less and make more trips. This behavior interpreted as shoppers are buying more fresh and less boxed and packaged food (Lutz 2015a). While known for “big box”, Wal-mart has been adapting for years in trying to find space in densely populated urban areas. Adjustment to an urban environment means less choices and more pre-made items, customers buying fewer items at a time, and people on the go and using different modes of transportation (Berliner 2015).

What is the millennial demographic wanting and demanding? Many in the industry look to Chipotle as an example of success. This consumer group wants customization of their food, so burritos and bowls at a particular price point is what many now expect. They also want delivery of their dishes and online and use of mobile application ordering. Millennials not only want to order and pickup food without human interaction, most of their influence is through reviews and mobile engagement on social media. The industry also sees this demographic as having to cater to a “restless palate” with an ever changing menu and creative twists on familiar favorites. Millennials also look at the business story of sustainability and local sourcing. In a time where young people are taking longer to move out of the house or live on their own, many are looking for a place to be able to hang out with their friends for an extended amount of time and socialize. Beer and booze is another priority with millennials. Many of these places have significant drink sales and restaurants are taking note with shared drinks and the creation of pitchers and punch bowls that a group can imbibe and share. As far as fast casual, sales saw 115 percent increase (see Fromm 2014).

In a *Forbes* December 2014 article, Jeff Fromm broke down six ways service brands look to engage with millennials in 2015. It comes down to unique flavors, fast casual imitation, customization of orders, automated or mobile interaction-often including point of sale, a sustainability story, and a place to get your drink on. With a noticeable difference between Mississippi and Texas gas stations, I used a modified version of Fromm’s categories to compare repurposed and working gas stations in Texas

including chain restaurant Rudy's, Watauga gas station Chef Pointe, repurposed gas stations Station Cafe in San Antonio and Austin's Stinson's.



Photo 1: Rudy's counter service.



Photo 2: Beef Jerky aisle at Buc-ee's.





*Photo 3: Buc-ee's New Braunfels location.*



*Photo 4: Distinctive Buc-ee's Storefront.*

## Unique flavors

From new fusion flavors or a variety of Asian hot sauces that find their way into dishes, millennials are looking for flavors that pack a punch, and many chefs are serving food that wakes up all parts of the tongue. Rudy's Barbecue may not have unique flavors but they have a consistency and a menu that returning customers can trust. Customers line up and snake around to the visible kitchen and counter with piped railing like line management at an amusement park. The staff hollers greetings as new customers file in or someone confirms they have never eaten at Rudy's before. Newbies are treated to samples before diving in with their orders. This gas station and barbecue chain features an interior decor and pumps outside that harken to its beginnings in the original country store in Leon Springs, where Rudolph (Rudy) Aue started serving barbecue in 1989. Rudy's Vice President of Operations, Pete Bassett, comments:

In every case the meats are seasoned with the house dry rub, slow-smoked using nothing but oak, which Rudy's claims burns slower than mesquite, and served with house barbecue "sauces" on the side...There is a lot of Texan flair at Rudy's, which makes sense since most locations are in Texas, but none are as important as the counter itself.... Meat is cut to order and can be seen behind the counter. [It's] placed on paper and served with bread, diners sitting at tables with red checks. There is more choice or diversity of meat, brisket is the main draw, but turkey, pulled pork and sausage are a draw as well (Bassett 2015).

Bassett shares that the secret to company consistency is "promoting within" much like roadside gas and eatery Stuckey's did in the 20th century. Bassett also explains that the company has "basically ten meats, ten sides, and five desserts. We haven't added items and we don't take any items away. We just do the same thing every single day which makes consistency a little bit easier" (Bassett 2015).

In the past, Rudy's was usually on a major thoroughfare, catering to a transient and local clientele, but the company is beginning to move away from pumps and gas to stand alone restaurants because they find they cannot compete with giants like Murphy Oil and Buc-ee's. Rudy's feels it has always looked at food first. Bassett notes:

Actually if you have a good restaurant site you are going to have a good fuel site just because you are going to have the traffic flows and the traffic counts. Some people look for a food site first and a fuel site second, which is what we did. Some of our franchise partners actually reversed it and looked for a fuel site first and food site second. The results are the same, no matter what you say you're looking at you are looking for lots of traffic going by every day. We never really considered fuel as a revenue source because it was more so what got us started in the early days (Bassett 2015).

When it comes to unique flavors and quality, Watauga gas station Chef Point continues to make newspaper and magazine food lists and gain attention from television shows. When Chef and owner

Franson Nwaeze and his wife Paula were looking to start their business, getting loans was easier with the unfinished gas station property they found. He enjoys the whimsy of the restaurant being in a gas station. Nwaeze is proud of the kitchen's use of quality produce and a rotating menu that reflects his love of food and recipes. Unlike Rudy's, the pumps and Conoco sign will be out front for awhile. He describes the place as an "April Fool":

The sign that was in front of the store that says 'homemade burgers.' When people walk in, they'd be surprised. Not only do you get burgers, you get top quality seafood. You know, sea scallops and shrimp, you can't find in a gas station, you can't find in most restaurants either. We do duck, we do lamb, we do everything. You don't expect to find in a place [like this] (Nwaeze 2015).

The Station Cafe and Pump Room, a repurposed gas station and corner store located in San Antonio's historic King William Cultural Arts District, has less of a rotating menu than Chef Pointe. The shop started with pizza and then expanded to sandwiches, salads, and soups. Pizza is still served but the menu board now reflects a wide range of choices, including bread baked on premises and homemade desserts that cater to a local clientele.



*Photo 5: Station Cafe hours the way Jon and Stacy Roe want it.*





*Photo 6: Station Cafe Deli counter.*

## Imitating Fast Casual

“Fast casual” is the trend of the moment in the United States. Positioned “in between” fast food and a restaurant, fast casual offers the promise of higher quality food but not full table service. Rudy’s (multiple locations), Station Café (San Antonio), and Stinson’s (Austin) all have a counter where customers order up. Unlike the other establishments interviewed, owner John Thompson of Stinson’s sees their set up as a “practical solution.” Sticking to its roots in Austin food trailer culture, the kitchen is a trailer parked out front on the corner of the property next to the converted canopy. A television is where the pumps used to be and picnic tables are in the breezeway where cars once passed though. Customers place orders in the old office, and full bar and tables are where the bays used to be.

Unlike the subdued colors and sounds of the coffee/wine bar of Stinson’s, Rudy’s embraces the fast casual from days before the term existed. Rooted in Texas barbecue tradition, from deer head trophies on the wall and red checkered plastic table cloths, the barbecue stand ephemera and cues are in the place. Customers get their own condiments and drinks and like many family barbecue stands, there is a wash station to help customers take care of sticky fingers. Station Cafe started in what is now known as The Pump Room. Owner Stacy Roe reminisced about the early days in the repurposed gas station and that their purchase of the deli counter was a game changer, since customers could see all that was offered in the original shop. The business has expanded to two buildings, the station and the store next door. From community dining and only two tables in the beginning of the business, the Roes now have

ample space in the kitchen and customers have more choice of where to sit. The new place still has a large deli counter where customers order off a giant menu board.

Chef Pointe is different in that diners walk past the cooler stocked with drinks and the station counter to pay for gas and incidentals. A hostess station and bar is just inside where a full rotating and special events menu can be ordered. Like Stinson's in Austin, Watauga's Chef Pointe also has a trailer for catering events but owner Franson Nwaeze stresses that it's a "mobile kitchen" over a trailer. Nwaeze's passion and investment in quality products continues in his mobile kitchen where the trailer is equipped to cook almost anything.

## Customization

The gas stations and repurposed stations I visited are not working on a scale or model like the Chipotle restaurant chain that often sets the industry standard for customization (at Chipotle customers can order a bowl or burrito and choose items for a certain price point). Variety and choice are important nonetheless. For example, Rudy's and Stinson's both have a set menu but enough choices to keep customers returning. Station Cafe has a large menu offering soups, salads, hot and cold sandwiches and pizza. Many of the sandwiches are spicy or have bold flavor and owners Jon and Stacy Roe offer vegetarian and vegan choices. Franson Nwaeze, owner of Chef Pointe, the largest restaurant of the Texas businesses I looked at, promises he will cook for anyone. He regularly accommodates customers with food sensitivities and fulfills requests for gluten-free and vegetarian options.



*Photo 7: Repurposed gas station, Filling Station with Station Cafe directly behind.*

## Going mobile

Fast food chains such as Dominos Pizza, Chipotle, and Taco Bell, are experimenting or have successfully implemented phone apps that make it possible to order, pay, and have meals delivered with very little human interaction. Others restaurants are following suit. For example, New York celebrity chef David Chang sees this as a new viable concept and his newest venture, Maple, is a \$26 million “quest to reinvent delivery [with] healthy, affordable, chef-worthy meals in the land of sad desk lunches” (Kessler 2015).

While the local places I included in my research are not currently taking orders or purchases through an app, each business has a social and traditional media presence. Rudy’s website allows customers to order and ship across the country. They provide a unique care package, letting loved ones, especially those in the military, have a taste of home. Rudy’s also has technology integration in the stores with electronic tablets on the tables and a camera and closed circuit television featuring the meat being cut to order.

Stinson’s main web presence is on Facebook, paying for sponsored posts and Twitter, keeping locals informed of what is happening at the company’s three Austin locations (Stinson’s just expanded to a space at Camp Mabry and a trailer near a local hospital). San Antonio’s Station Cafe and Pump Room and Watauga’s Chef Pointe are exploring the power of Yelp and other restaurant/services rating phone apps millennials like to use. In addition to social media, both businesses have had traditional media presence on television and in magazines and have published recipes of best selling dishes. While they do not let reviews dictate their menu or business plan, they are aware of how a negative review can be easy to post. Franson Nwaeze of Chef Pointe reminded me that everyone has a bad day, service people and customers:

People read reviews and they miss out on good restaurants. You don't do that, go try for yourself. Have a clear mind when you walk in. Come and sit down and eat. Make your own judgment. Don't read all those [reviews] and deprive yourself of great meals somewhere out there (Nwaeze 2015).

## Story

In his *Forbes* article, Fromm emphasizes the importance of a sustainability story to millennials. These Texas “mom and pop” establishments in my research highlighted their origin stories with less focus on sustainability. Station Café and Pump Room in San Antonio and Stinsons in Austin are both repurposed gas stations, while Chef Pointe and Rudy’s continue to have pumps out front. Chef Point likes the idea of pumps. When it was easier to get a loan and purchase a place, Franson Nwaeze and wife Paula Merrell found an unfinished gas station that became the Conoco station they now own. While part of the story has to do with the limits of the financing they could get, with the success of Chef Pointe, they would not change anything at this point.

I'm glad we have gas station, it's a big advertisement piece. People are just surprised. We have tons of people that walk in here to get gas or cigarettes, and instead of smelling hot dogs and cigarette and all that, [they say,] 'Wow that's a restaurant.' There's menu, there's choice of drinks and so forth... We didn't want a gas station, I didn't even want a café, I wanted a place to do catering [laughs]. It didn't turn out that way, thank God it didn't. Now we're busy, we can do catering for so many numbers of people, up to a thousand, sometimes more. So we can do anything here (Nwaeze 2015).

While Rudy's pumps have been a reminder of the humble beginnings as a country store, many locations will remove the pumps for extra parking spaces and future stores will not be in the oil business. Although some barbecue snobs scoff at Rudy's, it was a place many local Austinites suggested to me on my quest for gas station food research. As far as a country store growing into a regional chain, it seems as if growth and expansion was an interest from early on. Chain restaurant Fuddrucker's Phil Romano moved to Leon Springs after selling the hamburger chain and starting up the very first Macaroni Grill. Next to that Macaroni Grill was a gas station and in 1989 he started selling brisket out of that store next door. Sides like creamed corn and beans and the addition of sausage were next and Rudy's Country Store and BBQ developed so it was definitely a gas station before barbecue.

Romano's relationship with Brinker helped Rudy's grow into multiple stores and franchises in the Dallas area around 1994 but two years later Brinker decided not to exercise their right to option and the company closed the two outlets in Dallas. Leon Springs was back to the one store where the company began again in 1998 with the first company expansion being in New Braunfels.

We started off real slow. We opened one store in 1998 and our second store in 2000. We opened a couple of stores in 2002. We just did one or two stores a year for the first early years, which enabled us to really build our management base and our employee base. We promote primarily ninety percent from within. Most of all of our managers have been hourly employees to start (Bassett 2015).

Rudy's now has locations in five states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and Oklahoma.

At the Station Cafe and Pump Room, the operation started in what is now the Pump Room, a tap room serving a variety of beers; customers purchase food from The Station Cafe next door and bring it over or vice versa. Since its origins in the gas station, the business is now two places sitting next door to one another. Jon had a history in the restaurant business and knew if he were to stay in Texas, he'd have to open up his own shop:

We'd been looking to start a restaurant for a long time. Since we didn't have any money we were looking for something that was going to be very inexpensive to get into; inexpensive to convert to what we needed it to do. We ran across this building one day (Roe 2015).



Conversion began in August of 2006 and the Station Cafe opened December 20th of that year, just days before the birth of the couple's first child. The old gas station they leased in a historical district had the basics for a tight budget renovation and no room for expansion like enclosing under the canopy. There was enough electricity, water and sink and bathrooms outside. They built counter tops and the old indoor space was half kitchen and half dining room with limited seating of two tables- one seating two and another seating four. The seating expanded by putting a few picnic tables outside. When the business opened Stacy had just had their first child and John was a one man operation doing food preparation, serving, register, and dishes. They decided on pizza by the slice:

I cooked ahead of time and then they were wrapped in paper so I was able to grab the paper, put them in the oven and then use a spatula to get them out and didn't have to touch anything with my fingers. The salads were all pre-made before lunch (Roe 2015).

Since then, the place has expanded but the Roes continue to run this family business on their own terms; they are open only on weekdays to allow themselves family time on the weekends.

Like the Station Cafe and Chef Pointe, it's a family affair at Stinson's. John Thompson and his wife Sheridan wanted to emulate a neighborhood bistro where locals could get coffee in the mornings and return in the afternoon and evening for wine, beer and a bite to eat:

We love coffee, we love great wine, we like to eat. Combining, I've been giving thought to this idea of a café for over 20 years and refining my thoughts on what it should look like, what it should feel like. This is really where we ended up (Thompson 2015).

The converted gas station seems to be the anchor business, while a second shop was closed and sold in the time of this research and another two spots were in the works and have since opened. Unlike the other two couples that are in the trenches with day to day operations in the kitchen, the Thompsons are more on the money side:

I joke about being a recovering lawyer. I practiced law briefly, and I was an investment banker. I got out of that a number of years ago and have been doing development and financing projects. I've done a lot of hotels and leisure locations. I've done some casinos. We've been a part of developing a lot of restaurant concepts or brands that are already there and putting them in hotels and casinos and that kind of thing. I've never been more involved in that, so I've never been in the weeds of running one of these places (Thompson 2015).

Similar to Station Cafe's neighborhood vibe, Thompson's idea of the local bistro at this location is working:

We always had our eye on this location. We love the corner, the right side of the street for traffic coming into town. Then this building itself was kind of iconic, it was the old Cutler Automotive. I think going back to the 40s it was originally maybe a gas station then it became an auto repair shop and that's what most people think of it as is this

Cutler Automotive auto repair shop. Then it's been sitting empty for several years in the midst of one of the nicer neighborhoods in town. We can't tell you how many people have come up and said, "We are so glad you did something with that (Thompson 2015).

## Drinking Up

Going out and "getting your drink on" seems to be a priority with millennials. Since many twenty-somethings are living with parents or roommates, going out and socializing in a public space is important. For example, this demand has been a contributing factor in the bar and restaurant chain Buffalo Wild Wings's decision to catapult its recent growth and success. It is a place where guests feel welcome to stay for hours, can play trivia or watch sporting events, and drink and eat. (Lutz 2015b) The beverage industry has taken notice of the focus on social drinking and taken these cues to where many bar menus now have pitchers or punch bowls that a whole table can sit, socialize, and share.

Pete Bassett of Rudy's relates "Our beer sales are less than ten percent of total sales so that tells you that you are getting families in. It tells you that you just have people coming in to eat barbecue. Here in the South, here in Texas, I always tell people that barbecue is a great business to be in because us Texans, we just love barbecue" (Bassett 2015).

Stinson's and Station cafe could both be considered "brew and brews" where it is an all day business of coffee brewed in the morning or afternoon and beer "brews" served later in the day. Chef Pointe has a full bar. Even with the bars, these establishments are not yet serving the highly handcrafted cocktails millennials may find in other urban bars. So for these mom and pops businesses, beverage may be a great contributor to profit but it is the food that is the main draw for these gas stations and repurposed stations.

## Reflections

National Association of Convenience Store spokesperson Jeff Leonard looks to be getting his wish in that more people are getting out of their cars and into the store. While at a recent social gathering, I introduced myself and told two people about my research of Mississippi and Texas gas station food. The woman lit up at this and verified that her work in marketing was looking at this movement. "It's big" is what she told me. After looking at two different states, one where the kitchen is business and community survival, and the other, where a trailer culture is already accepted, I agree that this trend "is big," or at least a trend. While these oral histories and research have become case studies in small business with a food concentration, it does show that eating local and keeping local dollars in the community has even trickled into the corner gas station. When gas station convenience store chains like Quick Trip are renovating kitchens and revamping menus into less prepackaged food with a shelf

life beyond nuclear oblivion to healthier options, gas stations survive until the next trend. Whereas the recent drop in stock value and layoffs at Whole Foods prove that businesses noticed demands and now consumers have more options in getting the food they desire.

Austin may see more movement from the trailer to brick and mortar gas station convenience store in the near future. With pending city ordinances on air quality, barbecue places may move out to the suburbs or move inside and change cooking methods. Austin's trailers are also being pushed further out from downtown as more high-rises and cranes sprout every month in a rapidly growing city. While my hope at the beginning of my research was that gas stations would be the savior of the hot lunch and the Southern "meat and three" meal did not pan out, in Texas, especially Austin, gas stations may be a refuge in the near future for trailers and food innovators that cannot afford the loans or the risk of a brick and mortar space. By leasing a kitchen in a gas station, there is less risk and one is already in a great location with a transient customer base that turns over at a constant rate.

At the end of my research on gas station food, I am struck by how much gas stations have changed over the years. In the past, their architecture could be programmatic; they could draw a crowd with a flashy design--like a wigwam, doughnut or coffee can--or they could be modeled like a house like to fit into neighborhoods and appease neighbors. Gone are the days of S&H stamps and collectible promotions. "Secret kitchens" or just good, fresh food looks like how this decade's gas stations will draw in customers. Although all the Texas stores researched do not really follow trends of millennials where craft cocktails, customization and mobile apps drive fast casual, Chef Point's Franson Nwaeze is a business entrepreneur similar to the Mississippi mom and pops in that he is an innovator and quick to adjust when things are not working (trend or not, Chef Point is paying attention to behaviors). Aware of this list of millennial demands or not, Nwaeze thinks automation and less human interaction will continue:

I think the next phase of gas stations is going to be, [that there] will be nothing inside, maybe something inside with no cashiers. You walk in, you pump your own fuel, you get your thing and you self check out (Nwaeze 2015).

Hopefully great fresh food and human interaction will stave off this future prediction.

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