



*"The great eventful Present hides the Past; but through the din of its loud life hints and echoes from the life behind steal in."* ~John Greenleaf Whittier

## THIS OLD WALNUT HOUSE

~A Series of old Wildwood Bar Stories~

BY JOSH KINNEY

**E**choing back to what once stood as an old lodging house in the beginning of the 1900's, today is known in North Wildwood as "that" bar.

Though, many years ago while the same ocean wind we feel today whistled through the northern inlet of Wildwood, an old railroad made its way down New Jersey Avenue. There was a turning station and just a block away on what is today the corner of Olde New Jersey Avenue and Walnut Street was the Walnut House. With rooming available and a small downstairs bar area for a visitor to enjoy an evening drink before heading up to bed, the historic building was destined for a rich history that continues into the present.

"That" bar is Echo's, which today has a reputation for a lively and fun-loving crowd, an open bar area where many feel safe and comfortable. What visitors and even loyal patrons to Echo's don't know, is that the bar has undergone transformations from an old lodging house by a now obsolete railroad, to a famous entertainment and dinner show restaurant in the 1960's known as Joe Ellis' Restaurant until in the 1970's it became Mickey O'Rourke's and then the Di'Continental.

Joe Ellis' was a classy gourmet restaurant known for waiters and waitresses in formal attire with an entertaining dinner show as well as dancing. In its prime it was the place to be. In fact, whether it was Joe Ellis', Mickey O'Rourke's or the Di'Continental, the building was always The Talk of the Town, which happened to become the name of the place after its time as the Di'Continental. Pat Larr, a former Di'Continental and Mickey O'Rourke's patron said that she remembered one New Year's Eve when Steve Milky Lawler, who was the evening's entertainment, fell asleep at the piano. "It was my favorite place in all of Wildwood," she said, looking forward to going every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night, describing the place like the show Cheers, where everyone knew each other. "I wish I could go back to those days," she said.

Today, taking a walk in the back of the former kitchen area of Echo's,

original vintage stainless steel restaurant equipment remains intact and untouched. The former owner of Echo's, Chrissy Vangellis decided to keep the equipment around "in case she were to ever sell the place it would always have its value," said manager Joe Rullo.

Having taken him under her wing, Vangellis mentored Joe and showed him how the bar business operated. To her, it was a child that she nurtured and she grew her staff into a close knit family. Although he liked his job and had a great deal of respect and admiration for Chrissy, Joe went from working five shifts to four, each summer reducing his shifts with plans to eventually leave. It was during his time with two shifts when the tables were turned and he was thrown into working all shifts.

In one confusing and chaotic day five years ago on Irish weekend, Chrissy Vangellis passed away of a heart attack alone above her bar. The kingdom she had worked so hard for, a legacy of history by the sea was then passed on to Joe, who didn't want to see everything that had been built up during Chrissy's 20 year reign go under. The family asked if Rullo would manage the bar and he couldn't help but take on the task. "Baptism by fire" he calls it because whether he liked it or not, he was thrown into managing. Although especially challenging at first, today Joe couldn't be happier that his plans were thwarted.

"We all need each other to do well. Root for your neighbor to do well, to be successful because that means you're going to be successful," said Joe, who takes great pride in his island that he wants to see preserved and functioning well into the future. "Where else can you hang out and share fellowship with your friends and get paid for it? You make your living in t-shirts and flip flops!"

From its start, having fallen into the hands of owners that care about their business and their community, what is now Echo's continues to flourish toward the future. One day people will look back at this present season as another extraordinary moment in its reputable fun-loving and fascinating history.



Looking south on Olde New Jersey Ave. towards The Walnut House, circa 1905. Crowds are walking north towards Hereford Inlet to board the fishing boats at Mace's Pier. Photo courtesy of Dietz Photography



Joe Ellis', circa 1962. In 1974 it opened as Mickey O'Rourke's Joe Ellis' Restaurant. Sometime in the 80's it became the Di'Continental Restaurant, then Talk of the Town before it became "That" bar named Echos. Photo courtesy of Dietz Photography



Echo's 1998. Photo courtesy of Dietz Photography



Looking north on Olde New Jersey Ave. towards The Walnut House, circa 1923. Photo courtesy of Dietz Photography. Call if interested in old photos 215-407-4135

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