

Park Tower Profile

Jo Kaucher & Mickey Hornick, Restaurateurs Par Excellence

by Sheldon Atovsky

I believe that preparing and serving a meal is one of the most beautiful things that any of us may do for one another. To believe and to do this on a daily basis is one of the amazing traditional aspects of being a parent or caregiver. And it most certainly has that meaning for Park Tower residents Jo Kaucher and Mickey Hornick.

Jo and Mickey own the Chicago Diner, a restaurant with locations in the Lakeview and Logan Square neighborhoods. There are also catering and wholesale baking facets of the business, the latter with 50+ Whole Foods stores in the USA and Canada and more to come.



Photo by Sheldon Atovsky

They joined me a few weeks ago for an early evening visit on our trellised rooftop deck. Despite Mickey's recently-broken foot, the two of them shared a zest of life and a love for each other that made it downright exhilarating to be in their company. It also dawned on me that lacking those qualities, a married couple had probably best not go into the restaurant business!

The Chicago Diner has a motto, "Meat free since '83." Indeed, it is an internationally, American and Chicago awarded vegetarian and vegan establishment.

Given Mickey's background in finance -- he worked on Chicago's LaSalle Street -- he's good with numbers and has a feel for marketing. Jo's background is in baking and cooking, especially desserts and breads. She knows health and nutrition, in styles from simple to "haute cuisine." She is disciplined, he a joker. But both are analytical and creative, and they seem to have extraordinary vision in their respective areas.

Jo and Mickey were born and reared in Chicago. Mickey has always worked downtown, but Jo lived and waitressed for a while in Malibu, California. It was at the Bread Shop (now closed) that they met. She was baking and he, at age 32, had left LaSalle Street to take a job there washing dishes.

Mickey began feeling better, eating greens and natural foods, but Jo had to train him to understand vegan, organic and natural cuisine. She remembers, "Oh, boy, he could hold two green things in his hands and not know which was the cabbage!"

Jo and Mickey have lived at Park Tower for 27 years, but prior to remodeling seven years ago they did consider places deeper in the heart of the city, also further north in elegant Evanston.

They decided to stay. Edgewater was convenient, they appreciated the stimulating mix of ages and cultures -- and there was the pool which at certain times of day they could have virtually to themselves.

They now share combined 06-07 units in which the 07 portion is their bedroom and one of the bathrooms is the laundry. From their location on a lower floor, they have a splendid view of the park and lake. As Jo said, "When they're mowing the lawn I feel like they're mowing my lawn," and Mickey adds, "Does it get better than this, living on North Lake Shore Drive?"

When they opened the Chicago Diner, on April 2, 1983, vegan was virtually unknown in Chicago and, even if known, regarded somewhat disparagingly. Jo, however, has a "light California touch" and knows how to transform a healthy but ordinary recipe into something light, lively, and appealing.

The Chicago Diner really is a diner. With a deft twist, the items you might expect to find there become, "The Radical Reuben," "The Titanic BLT Burger," "Buddha's Karma Burger," and "Cuban Sandwich." All of them vegan and all of them fun.

Readers will not be surprised to learn that both Jo and Mickey are really always working. Having delegated many of the restaurants' operations to a nephew, Mi-

chael, and younger staff, they are now particularly involved with the catering and wholesale facets of their business.

Jo enjoys making pottery at Lillstreet Art Center. (Mickey says, smiling, that she is much sweeter when she comes home.) Mickey, says Jo, never rests. Even at their second home in Union Pier, Michigan, "He sits for maybe five minutes and then he's fixing the roof, fixing the house."

At home, Jo's agenda -- now that they're not at the restaurants 70 hours a week -- is to slow down and to develop a new routine. Mickey's is to find a location for a different kind of restaurant. Says he, "She retired and didn't tell me!" They also travel -- though much of it is work-related -- and socialize with family, friends, colleagues and former employees.



Photo by Mickey Hornick

To learn more about their food, history, t-shirts, cookbook and philanthropic causes go to www.veggiediner.com.

To visit the Chicago Diner on Halsted Street, jump on a southbound CTA Bus #36, get off at Roscoe, walk two short blocks, turn north and find the restaurant at 3411 North Halsted.

When you do, say "Hi" to the staff and be sure to mention that you read about this Chicago institution, the Chicago Diner, in Park Tower's TowerTalk **II**