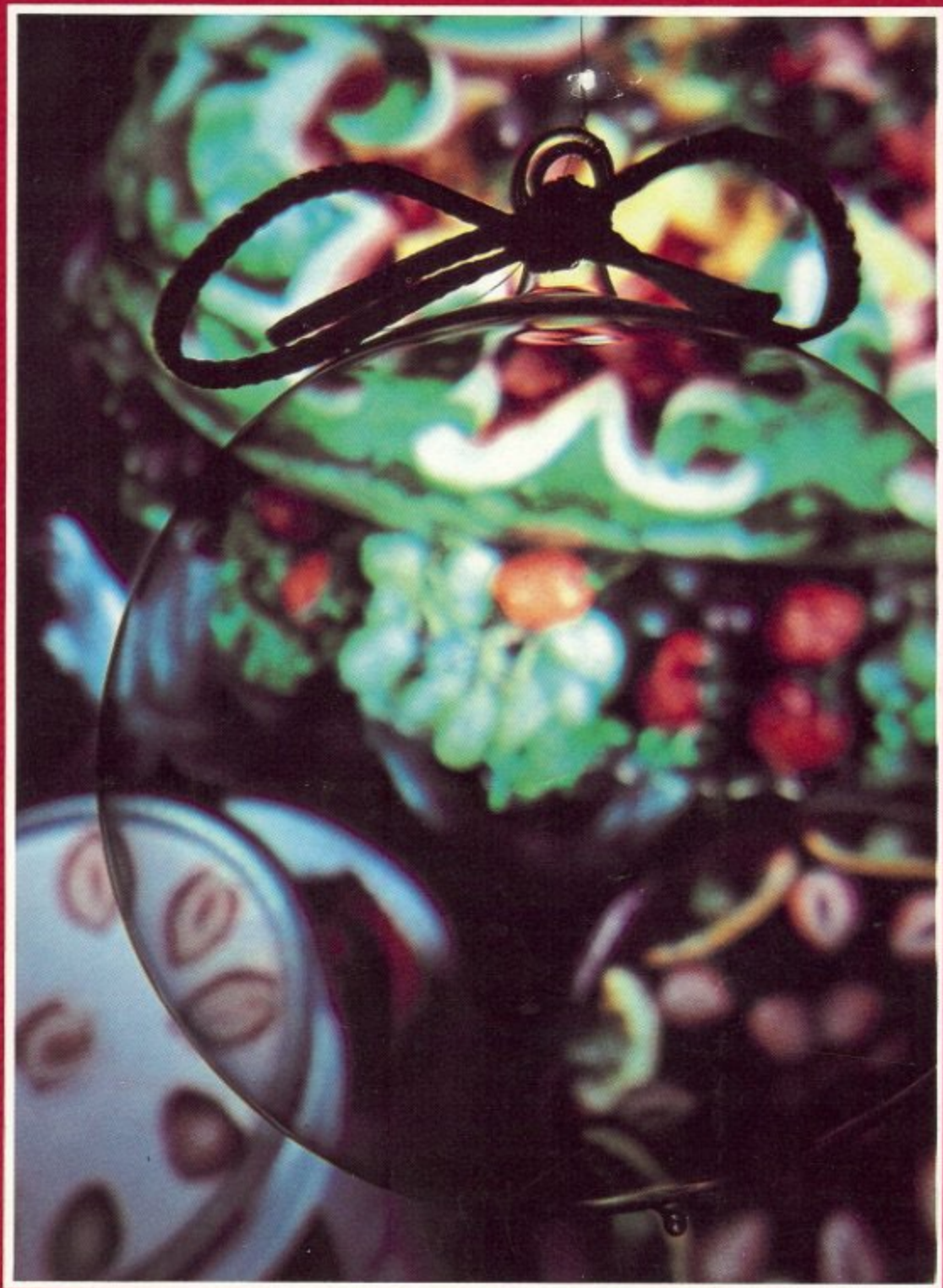


THE CHUCK WAGON

DECEMBER, 1980



CONANS LAYS SIEGE TO AUSTIN

In 1976, three youthful entrepreneurs offered deep-pan pizza to Austin, gambling that people who liked the pedestrian flat variety would love Conans. Austin bit.

By JACK FLOYD

Tom Strader looks like a guy you might meet down at the corner poolhall. You might even get to talking over a couple of beers, and, if it came up, you could be surprised to discover that this longhaired, mustached, flapping flannel-shirted character oversees the day-to-day operations of five thriving restaurants.

Actually, Strader's exterior is just another indication that intelligent business managers do not always come in three-piece suits. A look at one of the Conans Pizza stores makes it apparent that he has the operation under control: today they are grossing over \$5,000 a day, and do roughly twice that business on weekends.

A career in the restaurant business was not one of Strader's life plans, until a few years ago, he admits. After acquiring an engineering degree at an Oklahoma university, he was in Lake Tahoe, "just skiing and bumming, doing nothing," when his brother Jerry called him up. Jerry and a friend, Scott Leist, were starting up a pizza restaurant in Austin. Did Tom want work?

Jerry and Scott, who had been working at a deep-

pan pizza restaurant in Gainesville, Florida, were shrewd in their selection of Austin to launch their operation. "Austin was picked because UT had a very large building plan for future expansion; it was in the hundreds of millions. That tipped us off that the city was growing fast . . . also, there was no deep-pan pizza," Strader explains. So, in July of 1976, the first Conans Chicago-style deep-pan pizza was sold in a tiny restaurant down the street from the university.

"Our first day we made eighty dollars," says Strader, who was manager of the store.

Today the Conans operation makes around 700 pizzas on a weekday, and Strader is "district manager" of the five stores for owners Jerry and Scott. The title is deceptive, he points out; he might as well call himself "planet manager" for Conans since his "district" covers the entire operation.

Three of the five Conans stores are in growing business areas of suburban Austin, but store No. 5 opened in May only a couple of blocks from the original restaurant in the university area. So far, both are doing substantial business. Students can't seem to get enough of Conans pizza.

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weekends. On football days we'll be completely maxed out," Strader says. "Students are a big part of this town."

The name Conans originated with Scott Leist, who is a devoted "Conan comic freak," according to Strader. Conan is a science fiction barbarian, somewhere between a caveman and a quarterback in appearance, who enjoys lusty extraterrestrial adventures, often involving muscular sword-wielding women who ride around on huge mutant lizards. Maybe not the stuff of family entertainment, but it's a safe bet that more Austinites can identify Conans the pizza than Conan the barbarian.

The Conans menu sticks with the basics: pizza and salad. In four and a half years of operation, there have been two menu changes: green olives were dropped ("They got outrageously overpriced," Strader says) and beer was added. (Leist and the Straders had to wait three years to get a license to serve, under state law).

Most popular items, Strader says, are the "veggie" pizza, made with whole wheat crust and several vegetable items, and a toe-curling pizzafied version of the Dagwood sandwich, appropriately called the "savage." The savage, Strader enthusiastically reports, includes everything, including jalapenos and anchovies. It is popular not only with boisterous fraternity boys who traditionally eat strange food for fun, but with a large cross-section of customer types.

"I've seen four little old ladies come in here and order a savage," Strader says. "They'll shake a finger and say, 'Now don't forget the anchovies!'"

All pizzas are made with the option of white or

whole wheat crust. "When we first opened, maybe 25% of our orders were for whole wheat. Now a full two-thirds of our customers want it." Strader rejects the notion that health-food mania accounts for the popularity of the thick whole-wheat crusts. "Naw, it just tastes better," he says.

Strader's engineering background is perhaps symptomatic of the fascination he evidences for all things mechanical. He explains in careful detail the operation of machines (at the Conans warehouse) which mix dough and portion it out in balls to be delivered to the restaurants. And he is proudly impressed with a huge oven, which looks like a galvanized child's playhouse standing in the middle of Conans No. 5 kitchen, housing several revolving sheetrock shelves loaded with baking pizzas. "Look, it goes in this window," he demonstrates, then runs around to the other side of the oven, "and comes out this one . . . we have to take the pans out with pliers instead of paddles because they're so heavy."

The pizzas are huge. The only reason, Strader says, that salad is included on the menu is to pacify hun-

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gry customers while the pizzas are cooking. Because of their size, it takes at least 20 minutes to cook one after preparation.

Conans employs about 150 workers, and Strader does much of the hiring himself. About half, he says, are full-time workers, and half are part-time, most of the latter students.

"At least half of them won't last six months," he concedes, "but some have been here now for two or three years. Nearly all of my managers have worked their way up from pizza-makers." He tries to adhere to a policy of promoting from within.

"Everybody at Conans has a little responsibility," he says. "I'll promote somebody as fast as they're ready to take on responsibility. You can't do everything yourself, or you'll never get anything done."

Strader nevertheless maintains a close watch on the business, visiting each of the stores nearly every day. He posts articles for employees to read; consults managers on operations; insists that even the non-public areas of the stores are kept squeaky-clean. The back-area atmosphere is informal but organized, as evidenced by a small, hand-lettered

sign posted by a kitchen doorway: "When were the plants last watered?" with dates recorded by employees who last fed the lavish foliage.

Conans managers don't seem the type to nag and hound employees about routine tasks; but neither are they going to wind up with a dining room full of dead plants. It is this type of management-without-tyranny that helps keep Conans running smoothly.

As long as Conans continues to thrive, it will continue to expand, Strader says. "We're working now on a franchise agreement, and we plan to open up another store in San Marcos (a nearby college town), but not until next year," he says, qualifying that date due to tight economic times. "Our main concern is to save a little and quit spending money for a while."

He believes that business will stay good, though, because in his estimation, a Conan's pizza is a good deal for the price. "We try to keep our menu prices as low as possible," he says, adding that his prices are competitive with thinner, less filling pies from other chains. "It's not just students who come in. We get lots of working people at lunch, and big dinner crowds, with families. Pizza is a good deal for families. They can get one pizza for all those kids."

Strader appears to be having fun in his work, despite some of the drawbacks of the restaurant business. Food service operators, after all, can't usually cut loose and go "bumming around," or hit the road when they get a taste for new scenery. Doesn't he ever mind being tied to Conans? He considers for a minute, even answers with conviction: "That's part of the job; I have to live with it. I never want to get out of this business."