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That's Our 'Cue

Stubb's Bar-B-Q gets a smokin' redesign

By Rebecca Ann Robinson • Photography by Jessica Attie

Whenever a beloved restaurant or watering hole achieves institutional status, as Stubb's Bar-B-Q has, people get nervous when they hear talk about change. Change is for the outside world, like politics or the economy. It's not for things that aren't supposed to change; no matter what else happens, we want to be able to count on our favorite haunt for comfort.

When I heard the buzz about a "redo" over at 8th and Red River, my mouth went a little dry. Uh-oh. Stubb's is one of my favorite retreats, an awesome live music venue, a down-to-earth lunch spot and a casual place just to hang out. They can mess with Texas, but I don't want them to mess with Stubb's.

It was with trepidation that I ventured over to the new and improved Stubb's. I opened the wooden double doors and looked around tentatively. No chrome, no granite and, thank goodness, no bluebonnets. I was relieved. Stubb's was still here; the weathered floorboards, the rustic brick, the big framed windows. But, I began to notice a few subtle changes, sophisticated touches along with the rustic charm that makes Stubb's seem just a little more grown-up.

According to the design team—which includes Stubb's president and managing partner Jeff Waughta, Stubb's creative director Margaret Vera and Stephanie Moore of Cush Cush Design—subtlety was the point.

Waughta and his business partners reopened Stubb's in Austin in 1996. It was founded in Lubbock in 1968 by Christopher "Stubbs" Stubblefield, who served in the 96th Field Artillery, which was the last all-black Army infantry. There, during the Korean War, he learned to cook and later organized meals for many thousands of soldiers. Stubbs made his first barbeque in a hickory pit behind his restaurant in Lubbock.

"Keeping that history in mind," explains Moore, "our goal was to update the restaurant and bar so that it became more cohesive and highlighted the architecture." Margaret Vera adds that a key challenge was to capture the early Texas theme without becoming kitschy. Everyone on the design team agreed: no predictable lassos and barbed wire.

"This isn't so much a redo as a finish-out," Waughta notes. When the late Stubbs opened his restaurant in Austin in 1996, he and his partners had nothing on which to hang their hats but an empty space and the already legendary barbecue, with relatively no money in the bank. Interior improvements were not at the top of the list.

Waughta is modest about his role, but it is clear he has a

BAR PHOTO COURTESY STUBBS.

The antique bar (far left) hails from Goliad, where it was the main feature at the Horn Palace Saloon; the original beams and stone (left) remain in the first floor dining area; customers will always want Stubb's famous barbecue, but the menu has been updated with fresh herbs and homemade salad dressing.

reverence for history and passion for design. Things he definitely wanted to preserve were the original beams and stone in the first floor of the current building.

Waughta, Vera and Moore thoroughly researched early American design. Using that research as a guide, Waughta designed ladder-back chairs for the entire restaurant in his East Austin studio. The chairs create a clean, uniform look and add to the vintage feel. The multitasker also refurbished the front double doors using rare curly-grain longleaf pine harvested more than 100 years ago.

The antique bar is another beauty. It hails from Goliad, Texas, where it held court at the Horn Palace Saloon prior to languishing for twenty years in a barn. A piece of the end of the bar was missing, but Waughta refurbished the missing section, matching the ornate detail perfectly.

Other touches include elegant reproductions of early American lighting, with a unique white cylinder chandelier that hangs over the corner booth. The booth itself is comfy and has been updated with a classic diamond tuft pattern that matches the design of the nearby staff station.

A significant change whose effect is striking, if indirect, is the application of light-blue textured window treatments across the back windows of the bar. They filter the harsh glare that bounces off the white tarp covering the stage area outside and establish a soft and relaxing ambiance.

As with any good restaurant design project, part of the process is to update the menu in a way that reflects the refreshed concept. Texans are passionate about their barbeque, so Stubb's had to be careful not to do anything too drastic. No need for fans to panic, though. The famed barbecue is still the same, but other menu items were added and a few unpopular items deleted. You'll see fresh herbs and homemade salad dressing now, and that's a change for the better.

The team jokes with one another, and it is obvious they have a good working relationship. When asked about their biggest challenge and, conversely, their proudest moment, they pause and then exclaim in unison, "Working together!" It's clear, because of the success of the project and the fact that these three are still speaking to one another, that they shared the vision.

The result is obvious, too. A more diverse clientele now ventures into Stubb's these days. It includes the after-work crowd, couples on a romantic date, and students bringing in their parents and grandparents. "That wouldn't have happened in the old days," notes Waughta proudly.

The next challenge will be the expansion of the music venue, which will also include construction of a private party facility. "It's an evolving process," observes Waughta. "There is no definitive end. Each step lends a new perspective. I still think about those beginning days and how Austin embraced us and consider myself the luckiest guy in the world." amh