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# Tampa's Bern's Steak House: A Classic American Success Story

BY GAVIN SMITH

The story of Bern's Steak House in Tampa reads like a best-selling novel or a feel-good Hollywood film; everything about Bern's has stamps of its brilliant history embedded into it, from the building itself to the menu's ingredients.

And even today, the connection of an organic farm to supply the restaurant with fresh organic product still rings true in a green environment.

Bern Laxer's journey to Bern's Steak House was initially an ordinary one. He was born in New York City, growing up in the Bronx. After going to World War II, Mr. Laxer returned and he began studies for a degree in advertising from NYU. He met his wife, Gert, in a copywriting class, and in 1950 they were married. In order to support them, Mr. Laxer started a one-man advertising agency in the city.

The Laxers moved to Tampa in 1951 to help his aunt with her small restaurant. They liked the business so much that they started The Gator Juice Bar, a small sandwich shop in downtown Tampa, in 1953. Initially only selling a couple of items, eventually they decided to expand, adding hot breakfast and other features to the menu.

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**Bern Laxer**  
Bern's Steak House founder

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From the very beginning, they insisted on serving only fresh products. For example, hamburger meat was freshly ground each morning, and leftovers were never used. They even took the time to learn what each of their customers wanted on their toast, which meant carrying over 30 different kinds of jellies and jams.

Finally, after moving their operation to a new location, a small bar they purchased at a strip mall, and finding investors to help them begin a new restaurant, Bern's Steak House was born. As businesses in the strip mall fell under over time, Bern and Gert gradually bought every store for expansion.

Bern's Steak House has indeed been a labor of love for the entire Laxer family. The restaurant, which opened in 1956 with a 40-guest dining room, is now a seven-dining-room, 350-guest establishment. Now managed by their son, David Laxer, Bern's boasts an incomparable menu created with the freshest ingredients anywhere, a one-of-a-kind dessert room, and one of the most impressive wine collections in the world.

The experience of dining at Bern's Steak House is the pinnacle of perfection for steak lovers everywhere. Their cuts of meat are put through a dry-aging process on the premises for five to eight weeks. Steaks are made to order by expert grill masters who have more than 20 years of experience. Fresh cuts are taken from the cooler where they are kept to age and cut to order with the fat and bone trimmed off. The intricate process has proven to produce a delicious cut for which Bern's Steak House is well known.

"Early on, Bern perfected the technique of dry-aging steaks and built a special room in the kitchen to do this," said Heather Sherer-Berkoff, public relations director for Bern's Steak House.

Their steaks are complemented by dishes made of ingredients from Bern's privately owned organic farm.

"Bern started an organic farm to supply the restaurant with local, fresh produce," said Ms. Sherer-Berkoff. "We still have the farm and have partnered with a local organic farmer to improve production for usage at the restaurant."

The farm provides both Bern's Steak House and Side Bern's, another restaurant owned and operated by the family,

with fresh, local produce to use on all of their dishes, keeping in with Bern and Gert's tradition of using only the very best. Salads feature peeled tomatoes and English Land Cress, making even the beginning courses of the meal an exciting and unforgettable experience.

The seafood, like the meat, is made to order. Guests can choose from varieties of fish, lobster, shrimp, plus 21 types of caviar to suit their taste. After dinner, guests are taken to the Harry Waugh Dessert Room. Opened in 1987, the dessert room was built as a tribute to Mr. Harry Waugh, an internationally known and respected wine connoisseur, director of Chateau Latour and a good friend to Bern Laxer. Mr. Waugh's books and personal diaries on wine tasting are well known throughout the world.

The renowned dessert room affords visitors the opportunity for relaxing conversation, a glass of wine, perhaps a cigar, and access to any of over 50 desserts featured on the menu. In addition to its handmade desserts, the Harry Waugh Room features more than 1,000 after-dinner drinks, cordials and dessert wines, available by the glass and the bottle.

Depending on their taste, guests can choose from more than a dozen Sauternes, more than 200 scotches, ports from all over the globe and a selection of Madeira that is unrivaled. One such rarity is a 1792 Blandy's "Napoleon" Solera Madeira, which came from a "pipe" or supply that Napoleon Bonaparte had purchased but never drank, estimated to be worth \$6,000.

Visitors are also invited on a tour of the restaurant, where they can see everything from the kitchen to the cellars. It's what's in these cellars that this world-renowned establishment is really known for. Bern's Steak House is home to the world's largest private collection of wines, featuring labels from all over the globe.

"In the 1960s Bern fell in love with wine, which led to the addition of the wine cellar, and he started buying wine by the semi-trailer tractor to start the collection," said Ms. Sherer-Berkoff. "Today, we have the largest private wine collection in the world."

When guests tour the impressive cellars at Bern's, they are seeing only about 15 to 20 percent of the entire collection. In fact, most of the collection is



A scene from the Harry Waugh Dessert Room, a specially designed room for desserts, wines and after dinner drinks.

kept at three off-site warehouses nearby, although the rare wines are kept within the restaurant's working cellar. Currently, the oldest wine in the cellar is an 1802 Madeira, and the most valuable wine is an 1851 magnum of Gruaud Larose, worth approximately \$10,000.

"We offer 6,500 different choices ranging from \$20 to \$10,000 in price," said Ms. Sherer-Berkoff. "We have three full-time sommeliers who manage the collection. They are available for table-side consultation and can work within any budget."

Wine lovers can not only choose from the extensive list of wines in the collection, but they can also choose from about 110 reds and 90 whites by the glass, Sherries and over 100 port wines.

Over the years, Bern's has won many awards, with good reason. Their wine collection has been awarded the Wine Spectator Grand Award, and well as the James Beard Award in wine service. In addition to Ivy Awards, they have also been included in Florida Trend's Fine Dining Hall of Fame. Noted as "Most Fun Restaurant in America" by John Mariani of Esquire magazine, Bern's consistently receives high marks from Zagat's.

Even in a slower economy, Bern's

sticks to its game plan.

"Sure we have had to raise prices to keep current with ingredients, beef and wine, but overall, there has not been significant change," said Ms. Sherer-Berkoff. "The business model works and continues to work. I think right now we are experiencing the most slowdown in our history, but that is overall economics."

While times may change, what does not change is their overall philosophy, which seeps through their history into every aspect of operation. From the quality of food to the dedication of wait-staff (some of whom have been with Bern's for over 30 years), the fundamentals remain the same. For Bern's, their philosophy, "the customer must always come back," is their signature item.

"We do things differently," said Ms. Sherer-Berkoff. "We strive to offer a world-class dining experience from the minute you walk in until the minute you leave. That type of attitude isn't found in very many places today. Many businesses get lost focusing on the bottom line instead of remembering that without customers, they would be without a job. Bern's places this simple concept front and center."