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Business | Monday

An odd fast food tribute, where it all began Grillings

By Jonathon Lancer/The Orange County Register

Where else but in Southern California would a business owner of Japanese descent who peddles

Mexican-style food build a monument to the competition ó which just happens to be the ultimate business tale in American Cuisine?

Look a few blocks north of what the locals call downtown San Bernardino. There lies ground zero for quick and cheap eats ó the cheapened remains of the McDonald's brothers' invention that, for better or worse, changed how most of us eat. The site where the brothers thought up the odd blend of California life that is fast food. Peer back to 1948 and you would see two veteran restaurateurs seeking new sustenance for the automobile age. Their classic drive-in, with its lengthy barbecue-flavored menu and skating carhops, was losing appeal. So brothers Mac and Dick opted for limited selection and assembly-line cooking ó a plan they sketched in chalk on the family tennis court.



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Those 15-cent hamburgers, fries, soda, shakes and pie ó nothing else could be ordered ó weren't an overnight hit. But business was up 50 percent by 1954, and the 20,000-a-month milkshake tally caught the notice of blender salesman Ray Kroc.

Kroc suggested nationwide franchising. The brothers weren't interested, so Kroc volunteered to be the national agent and a franchisee. Seven years later, he went into deep hock to buy out the brothers for \$2.7 million. It was quite a deal. When Kroc died in 1984, the global

McDonald's brand he built was worth \$5.7 billion.

But commercial success hasn't trickled down to the corner of 14th and E in San Berdoo. Some idiot tore down the original burger stand two decades ago. First a music store, then a local opera group occupied a new structure. At least there was a dash of history left.

The opera's street sign is topped with a red circle adorned with the familiar yellow "M". A plaque from McDonald's Corp. below explains the significance of honoring the McDonald brothers. Two pieces of the original restaurant floor serve as part of the entrance to the opera building.

The effort, though, was halfhearted. This is the birthplace of an industry that sells an average of \$3 billion of food every day. That's economic clout worthy of more than tawdry placards across the street from a failed attempt to cash in on the site ó a boarded-up eatery called "Mickey D's".

Enter Albert Okura, founder of the 18-restaurant Juan Pollo roasted chicken chain. He recently bought the opera building and plans to convert it into his headquarters and a more palatable McDonald's shrine. He's already putting Mc-themed

jungle-gyms for kids in the parking lot, and he hopes to gather some McDonald's collectibles inside.

Typically, business folks barely acknowledge the competition. But honor it? Okura acknowledges the plan is a bit unorthodox, but he says it is a good move for a region where he's got four restaurants. And, he hopes, maybe some of the McDonald's mystique will rub off on his 14-year-old chain, which includes an outlet in La Habra.

There are other temples to the McDonald's fast-food saga. In Des Plaines, ILL., Kroc's first franchise sits as a museum to his legacy. And the oldest remaining McDonald's in Downey ó †still in the classic big golden arch design ó was saved from the bulldozers and revitalized as a restaurant and museum.

But as Okura put it, "this is where it all started. This is history."



Ground Zero:

Roast-chicken restaurateur Albert Okura poses at the site of the original McDonald's in San Bernardino, where he plans to build a shrine.