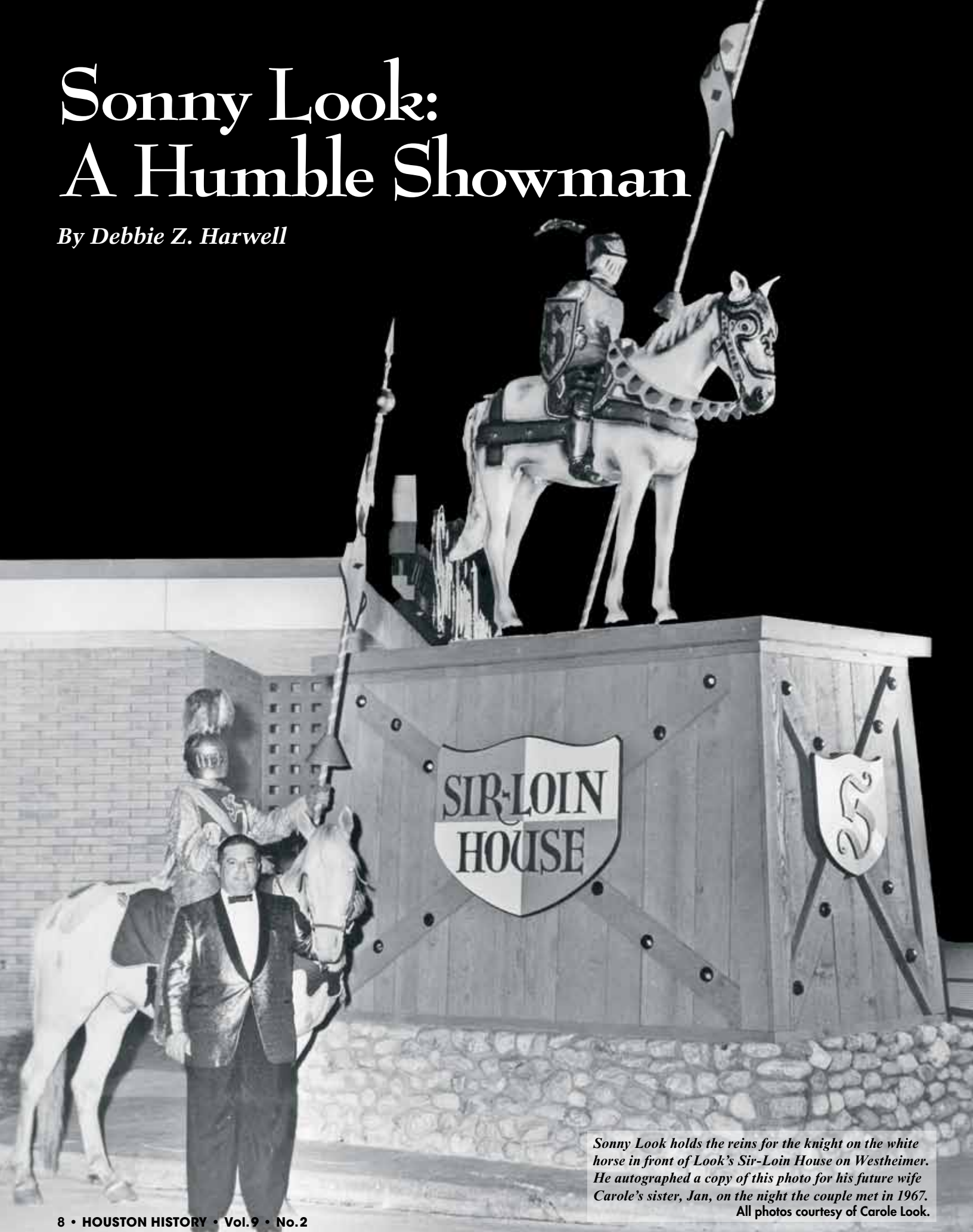


Sonny Look: A Humble Showman

By Debbie Z. Harwell



Sonny Look holds the reins for the knight on the white horse in front of Look's Sir-Loin House on Westheimer. He autographed a copy of this photo for his future wife Carole's sister, Jan, on the night the couple met in 1967.

All photos courtesy of Carole Look.

I will never forget the first time I saw Sonny Look. My family went to Look's Sir-Loin House to celebrate a special occasion in 1960, a time before eating out was common or Houston had become a national restaurant capital. Not long after the hostess seated us, a man approached our table, a larger-than-life kind of guy wearing a red brocade jacket. He was incredibly friendly and spoke to all of us—even me, an eight-year-old—as if we were the most important customers who ever walked in the door. I loved the four different flavors of butter, especially the honey butter. My parents raved about the steaks, and my dad appreciated the complimentary glass of wine Look offered to the adults. Since Texas law still prohibited liquor by the drink except in private clubs, that free glass of wine had tremendous appeal!

Look won us over on that first visit, and we celebrated many special occasions and just ordinary days at his restaurants over the years because you could always depend on a first-class experience. Little did I know then what the future held. Twenty years later, my husband, Tom Harwell, went to work for Sonny at Sunbelt Hotels, and he and his wife, Carole, became our dear friends. Recently Carole sat down with me to share memories of this Houston hospitality legend.¹

Garret Dawson “Sonny” Look was born on April 21, 1919, in Caldwell, Texas, the oldest of four children. He attended Brenham High School and at age fourteen took a job at the New York Café on Main Street in Brenham, just off the town square. He held every position from busboy to manager, and at age twenty-one, bought the café from the owner. Uncommon for a small town, the menu included Alaskan salmon, oysters, flounder, veal, seven different cuts of beef, and a wide array of appetizers and sides.

Sonny married Mary Reynolds of Brenham and, in 1942, enlisted in the Navy as a ship's cook 1st class. He sold the café to the owner of a cab company with a “gentleman's agreement” that Look could buy it back when he returned. He served on the USS *Beagle* in the Pacific until 1945. When he came back to Brenham, the owner refused to sell, so Sonny packed up Mary and their son Gary, who was born in 1944, and moved to Houston, which offered greater opportunities.

Look first sold sandwiches for a tavern on Riesner Street, but after six months the owner told Look he was too good for the establishment. From 1946 to 1948, he operated the Quitman Coffee Shop, which had twenty-five seats and a counter. A year later, he leased the former Lark Restaurant at 715 Quitman and changed the name to Sonny Look's. Greg Ortale, president and CEO of the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau (GHCVB) reminisced, “The stories are legendary . . . People would come in and order off the menu, when he first started . . . then he would run next door to the store to buy it and then come back and cook it.”² Sonny Look's started with forty-six seats and grew to 229 seats. In 1950, Look added a building with a larger pit than the Quitman location to take care of the bar-b-q and catering business. The catering operation serviced groups ranging from ten to 9,000 guests. He had seven trucks and two twenty-seven-foot trailers with bar-b-q pits, and rented more when needed.

Mary worked side by side with Sonny primarily as the cashier and office manager until her death from cancer in 1964. Gary Look remembers his parents working “very hard, seven days a week and holidays to build the restaurant and reputation they had. They seldom took a vacation.” To spend more time with them, Gary would go to the restaurant where he helped out doing a variety of different jobs.³

In 1959, Look moved to the “outskirts of town.” He opened Look's Sir-Loin House with 472 seats at 6112

Westheimer in the Briargrove Shopping Center.⁴ It was here that Sonny began wearing the flamboyant jackets made by his tailor and friend Frank Ortiz of Galveston. People went crazy for them! At one point, he had four restaurants and kept coats at all of them. Carole recalled, “When he would go from restaurant to restaurant, he would change his coat. He would tell people, ‘If you see me in this coat twice in one night, the coat's yours.’”

Carole met Sonny on March 31, 1967, when she and her family dined at the Sir-Loin House to celebrate her mother's birthday. After finding out Carole was a new Houstonian, Sonny invited them to the club for a drink (he had coffee; he never drank with the customers). It took him three months to convince Carole to go out with him despite a shared interest in horseback riding. They spent a lot of time together, and one day Carole realized she loved him—“What's not to love about Sonny?” she asked. They married a year later and had a daughter, Elizabeth, in 1972.

In April 1967, Look opened his premiere restaurant, Look's Sir-Loin Inn at 9810 South Main near the Astrodome. The 37,000 square foot facility had 1,400 seats on one floor. It was the largest free-standing eatery in Texas and the third largest in the country.

The Look legend had it that beef off the loin of a grain-fed steer so impressed England's King Henry VIII that he knighted the steak “Sir-Loin.” The Look steakhouses took

*“The harder you work,
the luckier you get.”*

— Sonny Look



Sonny Look immediately recognized that the bright jackets were a conversation piece. They continue to represent a signature of both the man and the restaurant.



The railroad-themed Look's Depot downtown on Market Square operated from 1971 to 1978. Filled with railroad memorabilia, it had 325 seats on three floors. A crane carried the 88-foot Santa Fe dining car through downtown on Sunday, July 16, 1972, and hoisted it into place. Look remodeled it for use as a cocktail lounge.

their English theme from this story and were famous for the knight on a white horse standing guard outside. Look had four white horses. Two worked in town, and two vacationed in the country; they would switch places every two weeks. The horses stabled in Greenridge near the Sir-Loin House. One walked to the Westheimer location, and the other traveled to South Main in a trailer.

Look owned all of his restaurants independently except for five bar-b-q barns he owned with partners. He continued to do business on a handshake throughout his long career. Ortale called him “a true Texan,” adding, “his handshake was all you needed.”⁵

Look's favorite restaurant story involved a close friend and frequent customer who stopped by the Sir-Loin House to pick up a box of steaks to take home to cook. Leaving in a hurry, he did not notice that he drove off in the wrong car. It looked just like his car, and the keys were in it, so off he went. The car's real owner was not happy to discover the mistake. In the meantime, the customer had not gone home. He was grilling the steaks somewhere else when his wife called looking for him. Sonny's moral to the story: “a good restaurateur never tells all he knows.”

Look found it interesting to observe how food trends changed. When he was pouring customers a free glass of his private-label rosé by Tavel, it was *the* wine. Rosé joined a list of French and German wines that were the “best”—Burgundy, Bordeaux, Chablis, Riesling, and Liebfraumilch (Blue Nun). Although California produced a few quality wines, they were not widely recognized until the late 1970s. Americans were fine-tuning their pallets. Look and the Petroleum Club's manager, Erik Worscheh, led the way in educating Houstonians about wine.⁶

In 1967, Look partnered in his first hotel, a Ramada Inn on South Main, when a friend, Bruce Weaver, Sr., asked him to invest. The two men went on to build or buy ten more hotels, some with other investors. Originally called Texas Interstate Ramadas, their company became Sunbelt Hotels in 1979 to better reflect the company's growth, which

included Hiltons at Hobby Airport, Beaumont, College Station, and Wichita Falls, along with properties that Sunbelt managed for other owners. Wayne Chappell, vice president of tradeshow relations for the GHCVB, called Look a “frontrunner” doing “visionary things” such as putting penthouse suites in his hotels that boasted full-size hot tubs and mirrors on the ceiling of the master bedroom.⁷

Look put his food and beverage expertise to work at the hotels. They featured notable restaurants like The Bridge in Ramada West on the Katy Freeway, and clubs like the Library Club at Ramada North and Sundance in the Beaumont Hilton, which alone netted over \$1 million a year. All of Sunbelt's hotels received numerous national awards. They had live entertainment, top-ranked dining facilities, and full ballrooms where they often served as many as 1,200 to 1,500 customers for holiday buffets.

Chappell noted, Look “was a big thinker, and he looked at the big picture.” Worscheh, credited him with bringing the concept of dining out to Houston and being instrumental in starting the Houston Restaurant Association (HRA) and the Texas Restaurant Association (TRA). He also served on the board of the national association.⁸ National chain restaurants had not yet gained a following, and certainly Houston did not offer that as an option. Carole recalled that whenever new restaurateurs came to town, Look impressed upon them that they had to join the HRA, TRA, and Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo if they wanted to get anywhere.

Sonny Look tirelessly promoted Houston and Texas as destinations, co-founding the Greater Houston Convention and Visitor's Council (GHVCV).⁹ From 1954, the Houston Chamber of Commerce had a convention committee with one person responsible for booking city conventions. In 1962, a group of local businessmen met at the Rice Hotel to discuss raising money to fund a convention and visitors council. They agreed to personally fund the council staff and hired Chester Wilkins of Chicago to run it. Look served as chairman of the board for the council from 1980 to 1982 and was named a lifetime director in 1983.



In February 1981, members of the GHCVC donned their boots and hats and traveled to Paris, France, to solicit convention and tourist business for Houston. Left to right: Phil Robertson, Ann Parker, Patty Davidson, Carole Look, Sonny Look, Jan Rolston, Len Rolston, Rosemary Garbett, Nancy Block, Mark Henry, and Paul (from New York, last name unknown).

An avid horseman, Look was active in the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. He purchased several champion animals, many of which he donated back to the kids or to other charities. “Sonny Look went everywhere he thought he was needed and helped out,” said Maudeen Marks whose father co-founded the show. “He’s an institution unto himself.”¹⁰

Although Look won more awards and accolades than we could put in this magazine, the greatest mark of his success came in the number of people whose lives he positively impacted—the many people who, like my husband Tom, said, “He was like a father to me.”¹¹



Marketing strategies for Look restaurants included the gold mugs and a relish bucket with raw vegetables, pickles, and olives. Look had to abandon using the mugs after the price rose from \$5 to \$16 a piece, and they became a favorite “souvenir” for diners to take.



A lifetime vice-president of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, Look also served as secretary and treasurer. Many rodeo performers enjoyed the hospitality at Look’s Sir-Loin Inn, including Charley Pride shown with Look in 1970.

Sonny wanted to help everyone, just as he had been helped along the way. He called his staff his associates not his employees, and he knew everyone’s name. His daughter Elizabeth recalled, “My Daddy was a great balance of businessman and father. I have great memories of making ‘the rounds’ on Saturday mornings — rounds to the hotels. He would speak to everyone — from housekeeping to kitchen staff to the front desk — and everyone in between. He truly loved the people who worked with him. And, he always made clear that his employees worked ‘with’ him, not ‘for’ him. They were a team together. He was not successful without them. He gave so many young kids and adults

chances to succeed and make something of themselves. He was super proud of his employees.” She added, “He taught me so much about owning and running a business. He was knowledgeable and wise and a great role model.”¹²

Unlike many entrepreneurs, as the business grew, Look took more time away from the restaurants than he had done in the early years. Gary remembers he and his wife, Toni, took many vacations with Sonny and Carole, and they had great times together. This was possible because Sonny trusted his associates to take responsibility for the restaurants when he was away. Carole recalled, “He never ever called home to see how things were. He said, ‘If they need me they know how to call me.’” Look believed this was the only way they could learn to make their own decisions.¹³

Many people worked for Sonny for decades. When the Sir-Loin Inn closed, Chef Princezola Jones had been there twenty-one years, starting out as a pantry girl. Similarly, restaurant manager Frank Robinson began working for Look at age twelve as a knight on the white horse.

Look found the right balance between being nice and being a tough businessman, instilling an appreciation for hard work and honesty. “He knew that his profits would walk out the back door of a restaurant in particular if you weren’t there,” Carole pointed out.

The “host’s host,” Sonny was equally comfortable with “down home” and gourmet experiences. Ortale recalled being in Houston only a week when he met Sonny for breakfast. “He just reached over and started putting [Tobasco] on my eggs, and I never looked back.” Even though Look spent his life in the restaurants, he enjoyed entertaining at home. Carole did most of the cooking, but Elizabeth recalls her dad would “occasionally, open the refrigerator, pull out any and all leftovers he could find, and throw together some hash. As a young girl, I would roll my eyes at that! But, he had a knack for putting together foods and flavors.” She recalled another incident when he impressed her friends by fixing a fabulous meal finished off with bananas foster.¹⁴

Faith was an important part of Sonny’s life. When he and Carole first married, he would go to his Lutheran church and then hurry back to go to the Baptist church with her before he finally “‘turned’ Baptist.” This was reflected in his advice to young people at the Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management. “My motto has always been ‘The harder you work, the luckier you get.’ I would advise students and alumni to work hard, perform like champions, have pride in your work, never be a quitter, put forth that little extra effort, and give back to the community. Be honest in all things. An untruth, a shady deal, or an unsavory business practice will catch up with you. There is no substitute for integrity. Put God first in your lives. Get involved in a church and accompany your family to it. This is basic for happiness and success in life, both socially and business-wise.”

Sonny had a stroke on November 13, 1991. After that it became apparent that Look’s Sir-Loin Inn would need to close, which it did on December 31. Sunbelt Hotels was later sold to Lane Hospitality in Illinois. Sonny was in a wheelchair and his speech was affected, but his mind was as sharp as ever, and he never lost an ounce of charm or his ability to positively impact others. Gary remembered this time, “Dad

... was very generous and always wanted everyone to have a great time. This did not stop with his stroke. I gained all my values, work ethic and love of life from him; he was a terrific teacher and role model.”¹⁵



After Sonny had a stroke, Carole was determined, “we weren’t going to let any moss grow under us, so we just went and did.” Here Sonny and Carole joined the Harwells when their daughter Tracey married David Wyatt in August 2000.

Photo courtesy of author.

Although life did not change much socially for the Looks, when they were out, Carole stuck close by to prevent people being embarrassed if they could not understand what Sonny had to say; but she quickly found that this was never an issue when they talked business because “they just knew.” Once when he wheeled himself over to talk to a hotel desk clerk, she was amazed to see the two talk on and on without difficulty. “He was never shy about getting involved and trying.” Sonny passed away on December 29, 2003.

Never did I dream as a child that the nice man in the fancy red coat would have such an impact on my life. I remember dinners, parties, and convention trips—including one to Las Vegas when Sonny offered to take the wives to a “ladies’ club” in retaliation for the company president hauling the husbands off to a “gentlemen’s club.” (We went to dinner instead because the club was closed on Sunday; knowing Sonny, he probably already knew that). I remember equally well his concern when our son fell face first into his ice cream cone at the Look’s farm outside Brenham; and, after his stroke, when Carole invited us to join them for dinner at Brennan’s, and Sonny waited until after the meal to let us know we had come to share their anniversary celebration.

Carole commented, “What a shame that God didn’t make millions and millions of Sonny Looks.” And that’s the truth. In retrospect, I see Sonny as the John Wayne of restaurateurs—he was a humble horseman; but when he put on a show, he put on a show! 🍷

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Tony Vasquez and Chimichurri's Grill

Sonny Look impacted the lives of many of his employees and the lessons they learned working in his restaurants opened new opportunities. One such person is Tony Vasquez, co-owner of Chimichurri's South American Grill, a successful waterfront restaurant in Kingwood.¹⁶

Tony began his restaurant career as a busboy and started working for Sonny Look as a server at the Sir-Loin Inn around 1969. He transferred to the Sir-Loin House and then to Don Quixote's where Sonny promoted him to assistant manager. He worked with Look at the Depot when downtown was a popular nightspot. He would have continued working for Look but left after the restaurants closed. "I was very, very happy working for Mr. Look," Tony recalled.


At Sonny's restaurants, Tony learned about exceptional service and food quality; but, most importantly, he found someone who shared his passion for the industry. Tony remembers, "Mr. Look had the business in his heart, which is what I learned. Because everything I do, I learned from him. I open my heart when I am at the restaurant . . . Mr. Look used to go around to every table in every restaurant. . . . Everybody knew Mr. Look." Tony reflected on how Sonny made the rounds of tables in each restaurant, talking to customers and pouring water and his rosé wine, "I haven't seen any owner of any restaurant that I worked for that the owner goes around the tables and talks to the people."

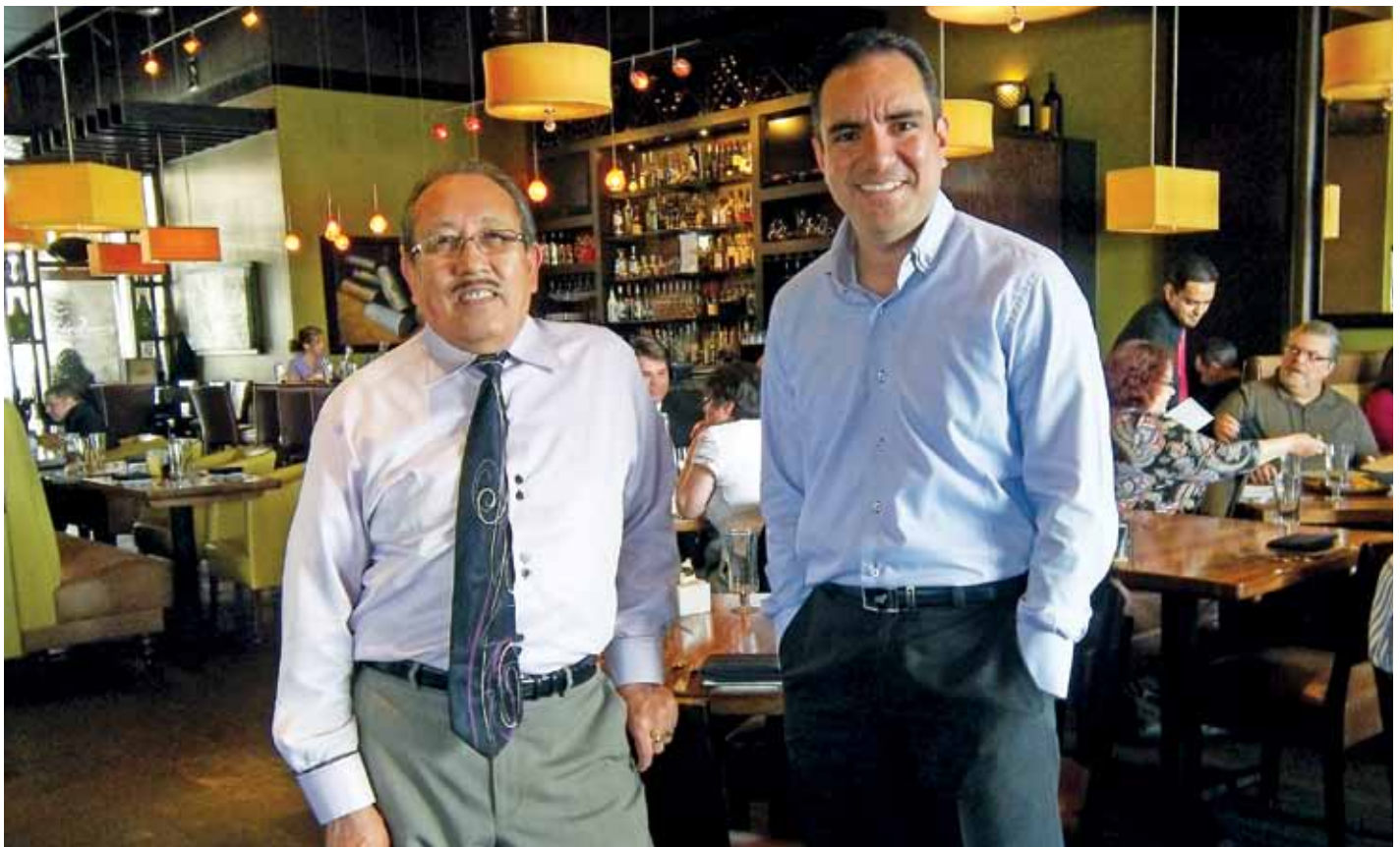
Tony always aspired to open his restaurant, but that takes money and experience. Once, Sonny offered to help

him, a gesture that Tony appreciated, but he was not yet ready. In April 2008, however, the time was right. Tony along with his son-in-law and co-owner, Ronald Perez, opened Chimichurri's, an upscale, comfortable, lakefront restaurant offering a quality dining experience.

The whole family, including Tony's wife, Rosa, and their daughters, have been involved in every step of the three-year process to realize the dream of owning their own restaurant—even down to the most minute details of the décor. The cuisine includes elements from many South American countries, and recipes incorporate specific items from those countries. Tony follows the example he learned from Sonny, visiting with the customers. "We put our heart into it because this is our own," he said. Ronald Perez added, "Consistency is our main concern" when it comes to food and service.

Now Vasquez and Perez are expanding the operation. This spring, they will open a new restaurant next door, Puerto. With cuisine based on the taco stands of Mexico City, it will provide a nice atmosphere with unique offerings where families can get in and get out quickly or linger. Although the atmosphere is casual, it will have the same standards of service and quality that Tony learned from Sonny all those years ago.

Chimichurri's is in King's Harbor on Lake Houston at 1660 West Lake Houston Parkway, Kingwood, TX 77339, (281) 360-0015, www.chimichurrisgrill.com. Puerto opens late spring at the same address, www.puertotacos.com. 



Tony Vasquez and co-owner Ronald Perez at Chimichurri's South American Grill in Kingwood, Texas.