



Walnut Grove civic center is Alma's Cafe

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by Carlos Alcala

To drive the levee roads around Walnut Grove is to drive at treetop level, just above the ripening pears reaching up from bottomland orchards. To sit in Alma's Cafe at this time of year is also to be surrounded by pears, or at least the talk of pears.

A trucker waiting for the harvest may talk of making the pear run up to Yakima, Wash. A local farmer will talk about an unusual pear tree with one branch so heavy with fruit it resembled the way bananas bunch.

Even a local contractor may get into the agriculture act, talking about how cherry trees have made inroads in traditional pear territory, thanks only to a new root stock that tolerates the abundant groundwater near the river.

Walnut Grove at the northern end of Sacramento County's rural panhandle- is a hub for the Delta and Alma's is the hub of Walnut Grove. It's a cafe civic center for an agricultural region that encompasses four counties.

At 5 a.m., Vic Savale wearing a Pear Festival apron opens the cafe. Savale runs Alma's with his wife, Joan, and daughters Teri and Debbie. Even before a customer sits down, Savale has a cup of coffee in front of him - or her, though the early morning clientele is overwhelmingly male.

Not long after 6 a.m., when the sun first pokes over the mountains, things get noisy as customers slam cups of liar's dice down on the Formica counter, between the coffee mugs and plates of pancakes and bacon.

It's a counter that has seen a lot of service. The gold flower pattern of the Formica shows conspicuous wear spots in front of each of the 14 counter stools. For 20 years, Savale has cheerfully set orders in front of Alma's customers.

"It's fun," he said. "They're your customers and your friends."

It often seems as though everyone is a friend of everyone else at Alma's. When someone walks in the door; every head swivels to look. It's disconcerting for an outsider, but it's born of friendly intent. Customers seem to expect each arrival to be someone they know and should greet.

After a greeting, it's dice and conversation, which reaches peak volume before ~ a.m.

"The noise level goes up to like Arco Arena," said sheriff's Deputy Mike Barroga, who has made Alma's a habit in his 30 years patrolling the Delta. "I couldn't hardly start my day without going to Alma's."

After the locals got used to him, they started taking him for granted, waiting for Barroga to come in so they could file reports, instead of calling the sheriff's office. "It has almost been a south substation for me," said Barroga, whose years in the Delta mean he has known the whistle stop under other names and owners.

Savale took over Alma's in January 1976. For his anniversary this year, he celebrated with prices of that year. Coffee was 23 cents (including tax). "Boy, was that ugly," he recalled.

By Sacramento standards, prices still seem somewhere in the past. Even so, Savale gets some good-natured ribbing. One customer, who acted reluctant to give up full price for breakfast, excused himself by saying, "I thought I was at Four Corners," implying the rival cafe had better prices.

Savale has been around two decades, but Alma's has been around longer. The original Alma retired to Arkansas and sold to Savale who had only planned on passing through Walnut Grove on his way to Oregon.

Most any morning in the cafe you can find one old-timer or another who could provide a decade or two of history beyond Savale. But "could provide" is a key phrase. The cafe customers may be talkative with one another, but they can turn reticent when a stranger approaches.

Without an introduction or a proper warmup, "people are pretty closemouthed around here," said Jerry Cochran, vice president of the Bank of Rio Vista. The customers of Alma's are all his customers, too, said Cochran. So he comes by the cafe he dubs it "the North County branch" five days a week on his way in to Rio Vista.

At Alma's, Cochran will collect deposits or get a signature on a loan, but you won't find him joining in the liar's dice. "It wouldn't look good for the bank to win all their money," he said. Less formal loans than Cochran's also take place at Alma's. A recent morning saw a transaction involving the loan of a block-and-tackle for pulling a vehicle engine. The deal was practically international, involving a third customer translating for the English-speaking lender and Spanish speaking borrower.

The cafe serves as informal headquarters for local volunteer firefighters and a kind of social service agency, too, when Savale collects donations to help out a local firefighter who is undergoing cancer treatment. "He's given a lot to the community," Savale said. "It's time the community gave back."

With all the functions it provides until 3 p.m. closing, Alma's seems to have earned its nickname: City Hall. On menus, the same idea is expressed in the cafe's tongue-in-cheek slogan, "Where the Elite Meet to Eat."

"And to B.S.," adds Cochran.