

# Road Rules

SEVEN RESTAURANTS HOUSED IN HISTORIC GAS STATIONS

by Sharon Holbrook



Owner Rob Phillips restored the old gas station that houses Signal Station Pizza in Portland, Oregon, to its 1939 appearance.

Savannah, Georgia, has the reputation of being haunted, but I saw a different sort of ghost as I relaxed on the patio of **Hop Atomica**. That ghost appeared to me in the canted plate-glass window, the corner lot, the orientation of the building toward the intersection, the echoes of garage doors on the facade. Yes, this restaurant and brewery serving wood-fired pizza and small-batch beer had been a service station, and a fine Midcentury Modern one by the looks of it. In fact, Hop Atomica’s midcentury-

inspired name and aesthetic are no accident. “We wanted to respect the building’s design roots and centered all of our branding around the building,” says Smith Mathews, co-owner of the popular new spot, which opened in 2020 and revived a vacant corner in the city’s Baldwin Park neighborhood.

All this fuss over an old and formerly boarded-up gas station? Decades ago, it might simply have been razed. But by the late 20th century, it seemed gas stations were finally worth talking about—and saving. Historic



preservation had begun to take a broader, less fusty approach, thanks in large part to Chester Liebs' now-classic work *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture*, in which he called for expanding preservation work to “a fuller range of places illustrating the American cultural narrative.” And in this case, that meant roadside commercial buildings, including the lowly service station.

As modern interstate highways made some older byways redundant, many gas stations folded—a sort of “Video Killed the Radio Star” moment in roadside architecture. And in the 1970s, gas shortages took a heavy toll on businesses already strained by the widespread move to self-service pumps and a decline in demand for car repairs and maintenance—the “service” part of service stations. After closing, many historic stations were lost, but others have survived long enough to be revived as the homes of new businesses. Often, that new business is a restaurant.

The **Dairy King** on old Route 66 in Commerce, Oklahoma, represents those early days of the automobile and the first generation of gas stations. Dairy King is



Dairy King is located along Historic Route 66, a National Treasure of the National Trust. For more information, visit [SavingPlaces.org/preserve-route-66](http://SavingPlaces.org/preserve-route-66)

housed in a red-and-white, Cottage-style former gas station that originally opened as a Marathon in 1927, and it caters to nostalgic tourists with its Instagrammable (and inoperable) vintage gas pumps and trademark Route 66 cookies. Owned by the Duboise family since 1980 and still operated by Treva Duboise and her son Charles, the retro, four-table diner offers all-American fare like burgers, fries, and soft-serve ice cream. While you're in Commerce, you can also stop by the boyhood home of baseball's Mickey Mantle, whose family moved to town so his father could work in Commerce's now-bygone mining industry.

Most surviving historic gas stations are renovations rather than strict period restorations. But for an extra-authentic step back in history, check out **Signal Station Pizza** in Portland, Oregon. Developer and classic car enthusiast Rob Phillips meticulously restored

this Art Moderne jewel to its original exterior glory in the early 2000s, and it now appears as it did on its opening day in June 1939. With its distinctive octagonal tower, vibrant neon signage, and original Signal branding and paint scheme, the National Register-listed building is a fixture in the St. Johns neighborhood. And the pizza? That's delicious, too, judging by the lines of diners coming for dine-outside and to-go pies and slices.

Fewer historic gas stations survive in bustling downtown centers, where rapid redevelopment will often lead to razing out-of-vogue buildings—particularly if they are perceived as outmoded in style but not yet of historic value. But quieter neighborhoods, where development tends to proceed more slowly, can be home to gems. **Xiao Bao Biscuit**, a celebrated pan-Asian restaurant owned by chef Joshua Walker, his wife, Duolan Li, and their friend Joey Ryan in Charleston, South Carolina, is one such example. Built sometime before 1944, it's a simpler, less-adorned building than some of the other stations.

And yet, Xiao Bao Biscuit's owners saw

*From top: Dairy King on old Route 66 in Commerce, Oklahoma, in 2009; The former gas station that contains Toucan Louie's dates to 1955.*



FROM TOP: CAROL HIGSMITH/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; JOHNNY WALKER



A onetime service station in Columbus, Ohio, built in 1937, has been reborn as Katalina's, a popular daytime cafe.

town. “I love old buildings not only for their character and charm, but their longevity and storied history,” says owner Kathleen Day. The hip little restaurant offers sweeter offerings, like its famous pancake balls (choose Nutella or pumpkin-apple butter filling, among others), as well as Latin America-inspired dishes like its savory breakfast tacos and award-winning Mazatlán slow-roasted pork-and-egg sandwich. Sit at the colorful patio tables while you nosh to get a look at the original bands of enameled brick.

Marc Kieffer, owner of **Toucan Louie's** in Charlotte, North Carolina, was similarly drawn to the history of his building—in this case, a 1955 Esso station. “It had been empty so long, the windows were broken out, and there was no electricity or plumbing.” But Kieffer saw both a past worth saving and a future worth seizing in the rounded-end, Box-style service station, which he knew would make a good neighborhood restaurant in an area that at the time had few dining options. Open for three and a half years now, the cafe serves food from morning to evening; grab its popular breakfasts and sandwiches with a house-roasted coffee or beer and sit inside or on the outside patio in sight of the midcentury-inspired Toucan Louie's sign.

For a different kind of midcentury design, stop by the **Snarf's Sandwiches** on South Broadway in Denver, Colorado, and see one of the most dramatic forms of postwar gas station architecture: the oversize, Exaggerated Modern canopy. At a time when gas stations were competing for attention from passing motorists, this 1950s Sinclair station announced itself not only with its Googie-style, look-at-me canopy, but also the signature green Sinclair's dinosaur statue. While the dinosaur is gone from this location, you can still grab a classic Snarf's toasted sub sandwich to eat under the canopy or next to the roomy interior's garage doors. Snarf's won Historic Denver's 2018 Remix Award for unconventional preservation projects. Like so many historic gas stations, it's now providing a different kind of fuel. **P**

potential; Walker says the station's “funk and grit” inspired the direction of the rehab. Even as they closed off garage bays and built a seamlessly blended interior wall to separate the kitchen from the bar, the goal was to retain the character and form of the old station. The canopy, which is believed to be original, is still in place, and most of the old storefront glass has been replicated. Plus, keeping to the station's existing design was, says Walker, “good for the budget.”

That's important for both historic gas stations and aspiring small business own-

ers, says Jeremy Ebersole, who serves on the board of directors at the Society for Commercial Archaeology and as the executive director of the Milwaukee Preservation Alliance. Old gas stations, particularly smaller ones, “offer a nice niche for small or new businesses—somewhere between the entry point of a food truck, which is fairly easy to work your way into, and a storefront, which takes a lot more capital.”

**Katalina's**, in Columbus, Ohio, is one such tiny building. Built in 1937, this old service station is now one of the most popular breakfast-and-brunch spots in