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A Drive thru Margaritaville

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Goode Company Hamburgers and Taqueria, adaptive reuse of Del Taco drive-thru, Kirby Drive.

When you drive up to your favorite Houston restaurant these days, you hope it's still going to be there. Two patio restaurants on Kirby Drive, on the other hand, frequently have long lines—Two Pesos and Goode Company Hamburgers.

The Houston-based, turquoise-and-pink Two Pesos restaurants are sprouting up like psilocybin mushrooms. Thirteen in town, 27 in all. They've spread as far as Georgia and Minnesota.

Why is this? There is better Mexican food. There is cheaper Mexican food.

There are many reasons for the success of Two Pesos, one of them obvious: it sells frozen margaritas for only 99 cents. It's happy, clean, even somewhat hip. Most importantly, it merges fast food with booze. Two Pesos stakes out its own piece of ground within the popular culture—between the fashionable, moderately priced restaurant and the drive-through joint. And with the economy the way it is, if you can come up with a trendy-looking place that has decent, cheap food (not *that* cheap, once you've gone back for your second margarita, extra soft taco, etc.), you've got something. Mexican food mixes well with the restaurant's open atmosphere. There are also the odd, entertaining details, such as the overhead, glass-enclosed conveyer belt that sends food from cashier to driver in the outside lane of the double drive-through window. The Kirby Drive location has an automatic teller machine.

Recently, Taco Cabana, a San Antonio-based company, sued Two Pesos for copying it architecturally. I visited Taco Cabana on Bellaire Boulevard for a comparison. Taco Cabana is pink on the outside; Two Pesos is turquoise. Taco Cabana is more cluttered inside, more authentically Mexican-looking. At Two Pesos the glass wall separating the service-counter area from the central dining room is clear; Taco Cabana's is covered with painted trees and birds. Taco Cabana also has an overhead conveyer belt in the drive-through, but it's mostly covered; you get to watch your food travel only during the last leg of its journey.

I also visited TaCasita, a family offshoot of Taco Cabana, at Richmond and Chimney Rock. It's very similar to Taco Cabana; its glass walls have painted monkeys, no birds.

Leaving TaCasita, I realized what it is I like so much about Two Pesos—its central dining area. Two Pesos looks like an old car garage turned into Don Johnson's birthday party. It has fake garage doors as walls, cement floors, and a stamped-metal ceiling. The architect of Two Pesos, Jim McDaniell, says he was going for the look of a "Casablanca bar on a cliff in Acapulco, overlooking the Pacific... in conjunction with the old Texas ice house at the side of the road." McDaniell says he wasn't aiming at the converted garage or service station look precisely, but for "the idea of *something* being converted." The garage doors, he says, help bring the outside in. He describes the cartoon-brilliant color scheme as "bordering on *Miami Vice*, something never done before in restaurants." Local design boards in other cities have rejected the color scheme, McDaniell says, but "here in Houston we don't have any of that."

Two Pesos seems to have universal appeal; customers include young black, white, and Hispanic couples on dates, West U. families grabbing a weekend meal, office buddies stopping for drinks after work, and friends meeting before the ball game. Two Pesos has a flexible personality. Later in the evening, it gets loose and loud, an all-night, open-air coffee shop with *salsa* bar.

For a while it looked like Jim Goode was taking over the world, or at least the Kirby Drive meridian. First he builds a successful barbecue restaurant, then he puts up another place across the street, then up pops a third one behind the second. When construction began in that same area for what would become Houston's Restaurant, I falsely predicted a Goode Company Visitors Center.

The second Goode Company, Goode Company Hamburgers, which is a combination mesquite-hamburger/Mexican-food operation, took over an abandoned Del Taco in 1984. Visual Del Taco references remain. Goode Company Hamburgers doesn't draw as wide a mix as Two Pesos, but is well loved by the West University crowd. Like Two Pesos, it has an enjoyable patio. "There was no grand scheme," Goode says, speaking of the patio. "It was kind of like everything else we do. Start off and just keep adding on." He and his wife, Kate, have been fiddling with the patio for several years. They started with "a concrete slab and a big red tent." The tent didn't work as a patio cover; the first big gust of wind blew it to the used-car lot across the street. They put up an aluminum roof, then added Saltillo tile, plastic windows, colored fluorescent bulbs, a fountain, and some potted plants. The colored bulbs, used decoratively, are a Goode original. "The only place I've seen it is in butcher shops, to make the meat look fresh. I bought colored film from a photo shop." The end result, according to Goode, is "a Mexican plaza kind of feeling."



Fountain court, Goode Company.

Prior to becoming a restaurateur, Goode was a commercial artist. He oversees all design and sign-making at his restaurants. The patio's white wrought-iron chairs (noisy as hell) are from Mexico; he went to a factory in Monterrey to select his white porcelain table tops. The patio's centerpiece is a gigantic stone fountain, made in Guadalajara. Goode bought it from an importer on Westheimer. "This was his big deal on the lot, the one that said, 'Hey, I sell fountains.' I said, 'Hey, can you sell me *that* one?'" The patio area has been expanded once, and if he had room, Goode would expand it again.

Goode says that sometimes his restaurants have evolved in ways counter to his own tastes, to accommodate his customers. He says he feels a bit uncomfortable at his own Goode Company Texas Seafood restaurant, which has changed into a more "sophisticated" and "elegant" operation than he had planned; he had wanted a funkier, oyster-bar mood. "I can hardly relate," he says. "I'm not a full-service kind of guy." ■



Overhead conveyer belt, outermost drive-thru lane, Two Pesos, Kirby Drive.

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