Chuck Rolles & Buzz Schneider Honored

A few weeks ago, on September 15, the Hawaii Restaurant Association inducted the second group of honorees into its Hall of Fame. My sister, Jean Kelley Rolles, attended what must have been a nostalgic evening since two of the inductees, Chuck Rolles and Buzz Schneider, had a direct connection with our father, Outrigger co-founder, Roy C. Kelley, and the early days of Travel & Tourism in Waikiki.

In the fifties, about half a century ago, Waikiki was a sleepy beachside community still recovering from the effects of World War II. In 1951, Roy and Estelle had just completed the 100-room Edgewater Hotel, located where the garage and swimming pool of the Embassy Suites Hotel* at Waikiki Beach Walk* now stand. The Edgewater had Waikiki’s first swimming pool next to some lush gardens. Across Lewers Street at Kalia Road, the Halekulani Hotel was then mainly a collection of cottages. Ground had yet to be broken for the first phase of the Outrigger Reef Hotel. All around there were other wood-framed cottages, sometimes rented to tourists but often occupied by people who worked in downtown Honolulu. They commuted to their jobs on electric trolley buses until 1958. These trolley buses, like many others still in service in cities around the world, drew their power from booms reaching up to a network of bare wires strung above major roads, including Kalakaua Avenue.

During those years, I was in college and then medical school. Jean was at Cornell Hotel and Restaurant School where she became friends with a classmate named Chuck Rolles.

Jean and Chuck were married on a winter day in snow-covered Binghamton in upstate New York in 1957. I attended the wedding carrying my recently born first child, Kathy, who is now the wife of David Carey, CEO of Outrigger Enterprises Group.

After a brief career as a Navy pilot, prematurely ended by post-Korean War federal budget cuts, Chuck and Jean traveled to Waikiki but planned to return to New York where Chuck had a job offer with a stock brokerage firm. At the end of their Hawaii visit, however, Chuck didn’t want to leave. Roy asked Chuck if he would like to put to good use some of the things he learned in hotel school by working at the recently opened Reef Hotel. Chuck said yes.

Meanwhile, in 1958, Roy determined that the Lewers Street area needed some more restaurants. He helped bankroll a bright young man named Buzz Schneider to open Buzz’s Steak and Lobster in one of the cottages on Beachwalk, next to the Edgewater Hotel. It featured an open-air, casual atmosphere and a salad bar. Buzz served the entire meal on one dish. He’d serve the meat from a wooden platter onto the salad plate, which was still smeared with the remains of the salad dressing. He claimed the salad dressing improved the flavor of the steak.

Jean recalls what happened next. “The lobby area of the mauka wing of the Edgewater Hotel was an open space that was not well utilized. It was used only a couple of days a week by a group that played duplicate bridge. In early 1959, my father, Roy, accompanied by Chuck, went to see Buzz and invited him to open a second steak house in that Edgewater space. Buzz declined the offer.

“After the meeting, Chuck said he’d like to put in the steak house. Roy was doubtful but finally agreed and then, with Chuck in tow, went to see his project manager and general right hand, Nobu Hidano. He asked Nobu to install some split sisal strips that Chuck thought would make great wall paneling. But he told Nobu to put up the paneling so it could be taken down easily because Chuck was probably only going to last three weeks!

“A simple partition was also put up, bamboo, fishnets and glass balls were hung from the ceiling, and second-hand kitchen equipment was purchased. We hired clean-cut college kids in shorts and sneakers as waiters. There were no tablecloths. The menus were painted on used bottles of Lancer’s wine. This was a radical contrast to the restaurant service available in other Waikiki hotels at the time – the deluxe Royal Hawaiian and the traditional Moana. There, wait help in coats and ties or even tuxedos served multi-course gourmet meals on white tablecloths with an endless supply of fine silverware and crystal.

“When the restaurant opened in March, 1959, it was an instant hit!

“Success brought with it challenges. I came in every afternoon with our nine-month-old son, Scott, in a bassinet and placed him on the floor while I did the food prep and later washed all the dishes by hand. Chuck was working the day shift at the Reef Hotel and every afternoon walked across the street to set up the salad bar and open the restaurant.

“From these simple beginnings Chuck expanded his business to the current total of nearly 30 restaurants across the United States from Massachusetts to Guam. He was the first to bring the steak house and salad bar concept to the mainland. Customers everywhere fell in love with the informal atmosphere, the open grill, the all-you-can-eat salad bar and the high-value concept.”

Carrying this new restaurant concept to the continental U.S. was not easy.
In 1960, Chuck and Jean moved to Aspen, Colorado, where they lived in a small trailer with their two children, Scott and Kiki (born later in 1959, clearly a landmark year for the young family), while they developed a Chuck’s-style restaurant called The Steak Pit in the basement of a commercial building.

Later they opened a Chuck’s in the La Brea district of Los Angeles. I happened to be in Los Angeles on opening day and came by to find everyone standing around waiting for the first customer. It was me! I had my meal with all sorts of attention and may have been the only customer they had the whole evening.

Two years later, Buzz expanded to Lanikai, on the other side of Oahu, when he bought the thatched-roof Lord’s at Lanikai on Kaelepulu Stream, just across from Kailua Beach Park. A restaurant in Pearl City, Oahu, followed in 1965. He moved his first restaurant to the Outrigger Reef Lanais, a block away on Saratoga Avenue, when the Waikiki Village construction took his site on Beachwalk in the early 1970s. That restaurant finally closed in January 2006 to make way for the construction of the Trump Tower, Waikiki Beach Walk.

Today, Chuck’s restaurants are still doing well across the U.S. Scott Rolles operates Chuck’s, now at the Outrigger Waikiki, in the same manner his dad did 50 years ago except you can’t get a steak dinner for $2.95 anymore. Chuck is now retired in Aspen. When I called to congratulate him on the Hall of Fame honor, he was quick to share credit with Jean, saying she had played a great role in his success.

Buzz passed away in 2006 at the age of 78, but members of his family still operate Buzz’s Original Steak House in Lanikai and in Pearl City today.

Congratulations to Chuck Rolles on this magnificent award. And to my good friend Buzz Schneider, how I wish you were here to share this honor.

**Hawaii Restaurant Association 2008 Hall of Fame Awardees**

- Eddie Flores - L & L Drive-Inn
- Marian Harada - Harada Enterprises, Marian’s and Dot’s Drive-Inn
- Paul Mann - Korner Pocket Bar & Grill
- Michel Martin - Chez Michel
- Shiro Matsuo - Shiro’s
- Denjiro Ota - Tip Top Cafe
- Chuck Rolles - Chuck’s Steak House
- Buzz Schneider - Buzz’s Steak House
- Roy Shimonishi - Hungry Lion
- Maurice Sullivan - McDonald’s
- Robert Taira - King’s Bakery