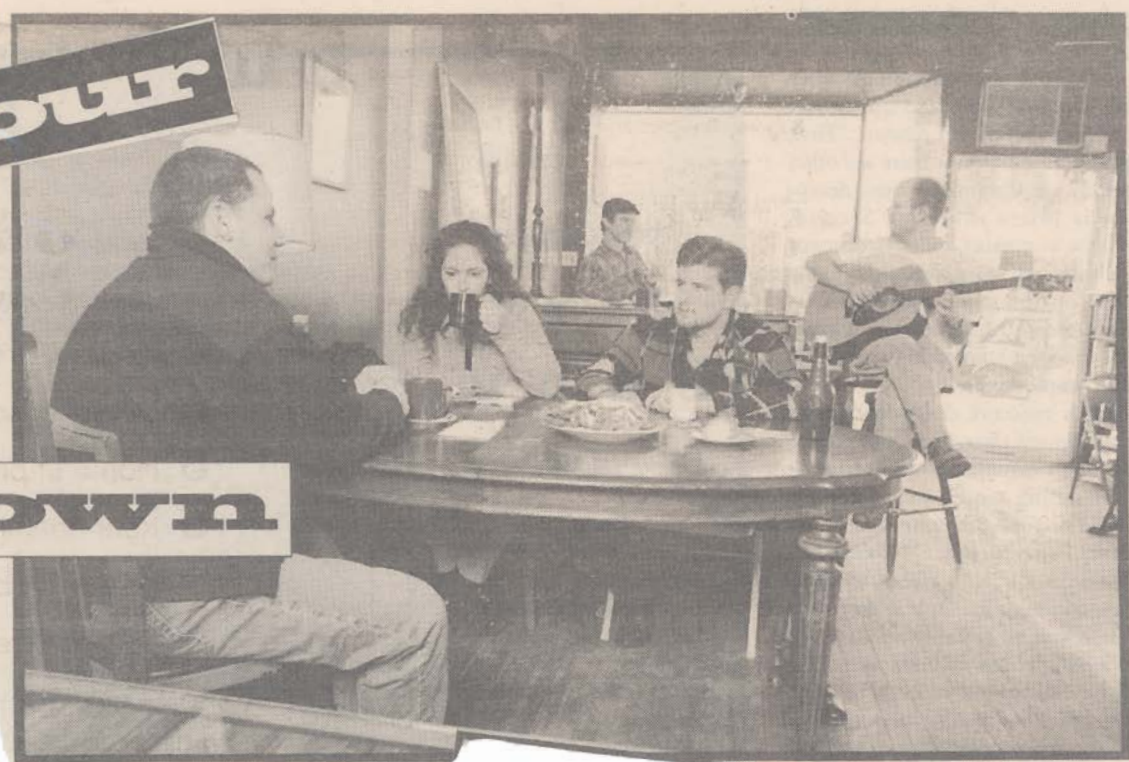




our town



House Blend

Will the eclectic Logan Beach Cafe change under new management?

BY DEIRDRE GUTHRIE

“**S**ing the one about the dog and the log!” pleads a large, smiling man with a wavy brown ponytail. “I love that one,” he adds under his breath. It’s almost quitting time at the Logan Beach Cafe, but Dwain Story, thinning gray hair over a red neckerchief and an acoustic guitar, begins to strum compliantly. Lu Boyle, a waitress dressed like an Indian princess, with spangles stitched to her ruby red blouse and dark, billowy pants, kicks her feet up in an impromptu polka as she sponges off the espresso machine. Dean Ireland, who drives a truck for a liquor distributor when he’s not slinging hash to rockabilly tunes as a part-time brunch cook here, laughs and whispers, “This place will become an opium den soon enough.”

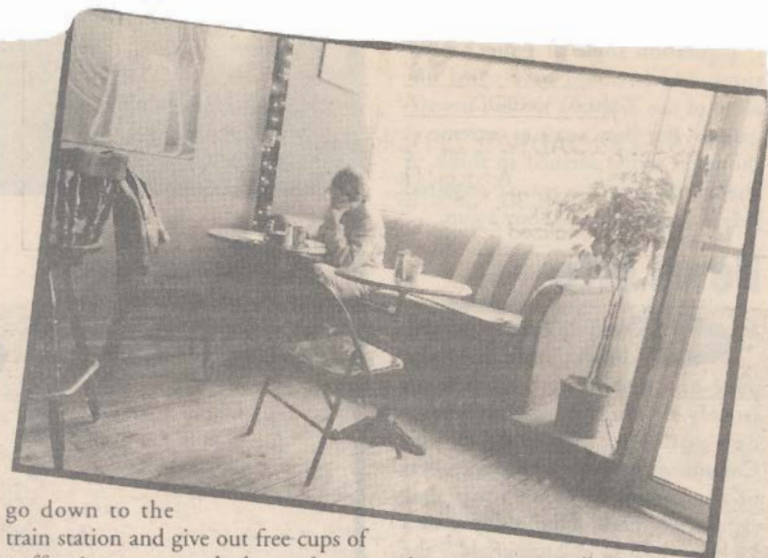
At one table a blond boy in a Guatemalan sweater leans toward a black woman with a printed scarf wrapped around her head. At another, a pensive Freud look-alike scribbles in a notebook and slurps a fragrant coconut-vegetable soup, while a volunteer from the Puerto Rican Cultural Center mouths the words to the one about the dog and the log. Other patrons sip their own wine or the cafe’s coffee, picking at the remains of the seven-course Indonesian dinner that has become traditional Friday-night fare at the cafe.

Like many things at the cafe, the recipes for the feast came from a neighbor, in this case a Dutch-Indonesian concert pianist named Sebastian. Since Virginia Lewey opened the cozy Beach in the dark hull of an Avon retail store at 2537 N. Kedzie five summers ago, locals who were thrilled to have a new hangout have donated couches, tables, chairs, floor lamps, a gaudy gold candelabra, even a cranky baby grand piano. One neighbor named Dave has personally walked over a Cuisinart, a juicer, stainless steel kitchen shelves, and armloads of books.

“We all call this place our haven,” says Ricardo Martinez, a shy 19-year-old brunch cook who grew up in Logan Square and started a year and a half ago at the cafe as a dishwasher.

But recently, as slicker joints like the cigar bar Smoke and the Boulevard Cafe have opened down the street, the Logan Beach crew has been uneasy about the cafe’s future. Lewey, a 44-year-old with a warm, crinkled face and spiky, pinkish brown hair, has spent much of the past year 700 miles away in Roanoke, Virginia, helping her frail father care for her Alzheimer’s-stricken mother. In September, when it became clear that her parents needed her more than her patrons, Lewey rented a house on the James River and put the business up for sale.

It was a difficult decision for Lewey, a lawyer who fled the “sterile” environs of McDermott, Will & Emery to open the cafe. When she first saw the space, the tin ceiling and walls desperately needed painting and “some crazy person” had nailed down pieces of dirty carpet over sticky layers of linoleum. “It was an archaeological dig just to get to the wood floors,” she says. In a year, when the place was presentable, Lewey relied on word of mouth to get customers, but it wasn’t always enough: “Sometimes I’d just



go down to the train station and give out free cups of coffee just so people knew I was around."

Not everyone was pleased by the news. Lewey remembers the summer her tables overflowed onto the sunny sidewalk and the alderman whispered that some people in the neighborhood were asking why that white bitch thought she owned the street. But she says memories like that are balanced by the time Martinez's mother, hell-bent on keeping his nose clean, asked Lewey to talk to him

about going to college.

Or the time an Indonesian family came in for the Friday-night feast and told her, "This is too spicy for Americans—you should keep this version for us and make one for you."

In February of last year, two men, Ben Tischer and Music Box manager Eric Salus, rented the space downstairs from Lewey and turned it into Salon Zwerge, a cabaret for noise music, free jazz, and experimental film. (*Zwerge* is German for "dwarfs,"

and refers to the low ceiling.) Upstairs, Lewey has booked music on and off, usually bluegrass on Fridays and acoustic jazz on Saturdays. On Mondays Nashville transplant Deanna Varagona, of the band Lambchop, leads an open mike.

When Lewey started making extended trips to Roanoke, her employees—many of whom, like dinner cook Lea Tshilds, are musicians or artists who have moved to the area in the last few years—took turns ordering, scheduling, and cooking. Lewey was hoping hard that one or more of them would be able to come up with the cash to buy the cafe, and thus keep it from falling into the hands of people who wouldn't understand its homemade appeal. But her first choice, a lion-maned manager named Danny Krieger, grew frazzled under the stress of endless operational anarchy and left for Los Angeles.

"You know, the kids who work here have a lot of other things going on, and the schedule is always full of holes," Lewey says regretfully. "And then the oven wouldn't work or the freezer would melt down and it just got to be too much for him. A cafe is like a child—there every day, relentless. Danny's a wonderful musician... I think this was probably just a resting spot for him anyhow."

She transferred her hopes to Tshilds, another musician and a "creative genius" in the kitchen. Tshilds, who wears clunky vintage glasses and used to have what Lewey admired as "the coolest dreads I'd ever seen on a white girl," more modestly calls her cooking "improvisational." Her specials on a recent night included Brie-portobello quesadillas with green onions and a salsa made with ancho chili peppers and basil, fettucine in a butter-ancho pesto with portobello, and a pita pizza with an ancho-dill pesto, roasted eggplant, and feta. "She reads a lot of cookbooks and gets excited about certain ingredients," says Lewey. "Before the anchos it was tamarind."

Unfortunately Tshilds "couldn't offer a dollar that made sense," Lewey says, and it was back to square one.

Among the prospective buyers Lewey turned down was a man who

PHOTOS/JIM ALEXANDER NEWBERRY

claimed to be from the neighborhood, "but no one knew who he was."

"He was willing to offer the full purchase price, but kept changing his terms," she says. "And he was so abrasive. He'd come in and talk to the employees like, 'Hey bud, you got a customer.'"

But at long last, she got the offer she'd been waiting for. Last Friday, Lewey sat down to sign papers with one of her former baristas, Ari Sternberg, and Nathan Ferguson, a first-year law student at Chicago-Kent who doesn't even drink coffee; she expects the deal to close January 22. Sternberg, 26, and Ferguson, 28, play together in a band called Jetcopter Five. Friends since just after college, when Ferguson dated Sternberg's sister, they'd been looking for a neighborhood bar or cafe for more than a year. "We're planning to stick it out," says Ferguson. "We're not in this to make a fast buck. We could've made more money in a mutual fund."

"But I plan to slowly embezzle him out of this place, cookie by cookie," says Sternberg.

"Part of why we were drawn to the Beach is that it is a place where a 50-year-old composer can play Scrabble with an 18-year-old high school student," he says. He and Ferguson plan to keep the original staff and seek their input on any changes, though they already seem to have a few plans. They've been scouring the restaurant supply stores on Madison, and are attending an auction at the just-closed *Urbus Orbis*. "Virginia replaced the oven, but we need to deal with the refrigeration problem pretty soon," Ferguson says.

"We'll spiff it up a bit," he continues, "keep staples like the 'Free Dog/ Apartment for Rent' bulletin board, local artists' work on the walls. We'll probably move the coffee bar to the back, add some of our friends' favorite recipes, like corned beef hash, milk shakes, rice pudding, and custard-style French toast."

Both men want to expand the music programming. "We have to look into what the landlord will allow, but we'd like to have regular acoustic jazz upstairs and experimental music in the basement," says Ferguson.

Lewey wishes them the best of luck, and says she's confident the new owners won't "Starbuck" the place. "Now I fantasize about the day I can return as a visitor," she says, "order coffee, sit back, enjoy the music, and nod my head in sympathy when the new managers tell me the refrigerator went dead in the middle of the night." ■