

Chuy's is serious business

But owners still have lots of fun

BY TELA GOODWIN MANGE

If Elvis were alive, chances are that he'd probably trade in those icky fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches for some down-home Tex-Mex at Chuy's Comida Deluxe.

After all, Chuy's restaurant has a soft spot for El King of Rock y Roll.

The original Chuy's on Barton Springs Road has a shrine to Elvis in the entry way and a velvet Elvis on the wall marking the way to the smoking section. The second Austin Chuy's has a velvet Elvis — crying, no less — hanging on the wall. And Mike Young, one of the owners of Chuy's, has several china statuettes of Elvis in his office.

And, it's because of Elvis that a Chuy's will be opening around the first of January next year in the River Oaks section of Houston.

Young says (tongue in cheek), that Elvis telephoned him at 5 a.m. one day — collect, mind you — to tell Young that he wanted Chuy's to go to Houston.

There really was no other choice, Young said.

Work is progressing on the Houston restaurant. Architectural plans have been made, and several employees have already been hired.



Chuy's owners John Zapp, left, and Mike Young have a fondness for fish and Elvis, which they proudly display.

Young said the Houston restaurant will

have a "Blue Hawaii feel." Among other things, there will be a shrine to Don Ho, whom Young calls the "Polynesian Elvis." Young said he hopes to bring Ho to the opening, perhaps even to perform his immortal hit "Tiny Bubbles."

The Houston restaurant should do good business, Young said, because of its location in upscale River Oaks.

Meanwhile, the original Austin restaurant is playing to standing-room-only crowds, and the second Chuy's in Austin is getting a face lift.

The eclectically designed restaurant on far North Lamar Boulevard is being redone. Young said, be-

cause "we indulged ourselves a little too much in the tricks."

The restaurant featured hundreds of dinosaurs hanging from the ceiling, dozens of lava lamps and the trunk of a Lincoln Continental as well as the velvet Elvis.

Lava lamp aficionados will be relieved to know the lamps are staying in the restaurant, as are the dinosaurs. Only now, the decor won't seem quite so scattered.

And the Dallas restaurant is doing better these days, Young said. In the beginning, the restaurant experienced some bad luck with its location.

When Chuy's first signed a lease on a corner near the West End in

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downtown Dallas, an office building, parking garage and a satellite of the Second City comedy club were supposed to be opened and the office building near capacity.

Two years later, Chuy's still is the only tenant in the office building.

"We had a tough first year there," Young said, "but we worked real hard on it."

So far, 1989 has been a banner year for Chuy's. Sales at the three restaurants will reach \$6 million this year, he said.

"All the restaurants have been breaking records every month," Young said. It's a feat he credits to Chuy's commitment to its product.

"We do a lot of things the public doesn't really know about," he said, including using only 100 percent ground sirloin and eliminating lard and preservatives and trying to limit the amount of cholesterol in meals.

"What we're trying to do is to serve an authentic peasant-style meal and to make it healthy. I think Mexican food can be a real healthy product," Young said. "It's a real natural food."

Allen Reich, an Austin restaurant consultant, attributes Chuy's success to its good food, good drinks and "funky" bar atmosphere.

"They're successful because they're different," he said. Saying most Mexican restaurants look alike inside, Reich said Chuy's owners took risks with the decor and won.

"And it's a well-run business," Reich said. "They don't make a lot of mistakes."

Young is banking on Mexican food remaining popular. Chuy's goal is to open five more restaurants (including the one in Houston) in the next three years, bringing the total to eight Chuy's in Texas.

It's not something that Young and partner John Zapp had set out to do, though, when they first opened up the bright pink building on Barton Springs Road.

"The second month, we did \$70,000 in sales and we were ecstatic," he said.

Young and Zapp have made a point of taking care of business so they can have fun with the restaurants.

"There's a fine line between the way we run our business and the way we have fun," Young said. The restaurants have a tight system of accounting and controls, he said.

That strict accounting — Young receives weekly reports from each of the restaurants within two days of the end of the week — makes it much easier to present a competent front to the bankers Young and Zapp approach for financing.

"Finding money is a lot more difficult these days, and it gets harder and harder," Young said. "It's made us a much better company."

"We take our business seriously, and we take our customers seriously, but we don't take ourselves seriously," Young said. Plus, he said, "We have great employees and great managers, which allows us to be nuts."

Chuy's is not the first restaurant venture for Young.

He started Mike and Charlie's in 1976, then Los Tres Bobos in 1978. He and Zapp then started Gianni's, an Italian food restaurant located where Carmelo's now is on East Fifth Street, and sold out several years later to start Chuy's in 1981. □