

Rebirth of Zaharakos

Tony Moravec surpasses his vision of what used to be

By Barney Quick

Five years ago, Tony Moravec had no idea that turn-of-the-century ice cream parlors — and the soda fountains, mechanical musical instruments and various other accouterments to be found in them — would become his all-consuming passion.

He was busy manufacturing and distributing the pharmaceuticals, diaper rash ointment, skin moisturizer and related products that his companies, Blairex and Applied Laboratories, had sold for more than 20 years.

Today, he owns Zaharakos, a downtown Columbus institution since 1900, and collects as many artifacts from the heyday of ice cream parlors as he can find. In buying and restoring Zaharakos, he has reinforced Columbus's worldwide status as a tourist destination and has been integral to the downtown renaissance currently under way.

That's what caught the attention of the Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce when it was deciding on this year's Company of the Year Award recipient.

The point of the restoration was to evoke the original feel of the space and pay tribute to the taste and vision of the first generation of Zaharako brothers who came to Columbus from Greece.

Throughout the decades, stainless steel and plastic had encroached on the marble, onyx, brass, tin and intricately carved mahogany that characterized the eatery a hundred-plus years ago. The Welte Orchestrion, a marvelous cacophony of pipes, cymbals, triangle and snare drum that was the crown jewel of Zaharakos, was also gone from the premises when the last Zaharakos closed the doors in 2006.

Everything, including the prized music box, is back now. In fact, the



PHOTO BY JOEL PHILIPPSEN

Zaharakos owner Tony Moravec changes the rolls of music in the restaurant's historic orchestrion.

original space has doubled, to make room for a museum of the collectibles Moravec has acquired.

Something needs to be done

When health and career issues among the remaining interested Zaharako family members caused the restaurant to close, a group of local businessmen began discussing its revival. Moravec was brought into it by his neighbor, orthodontist Pete Leonard. The original structure for the group, called the Columbus Capital Foundation, was nonprofit and had a time frame for the restoration project of six months.

"I told them, 'Guys, it's going to take a whole lot of years and money,'" Moravec recalls. "I also said that one person should run with it. There was some passion within the group, and I figured one person in particular would

step up. At the next meeting, they said, 'Tony, that's a great idea, and we think you should do it.'"

In May 2007, Moravec purchased Zaharakos. The next two steps he took were to set up a "war room" in a conference room at Blairex, where he created a timeline for all aspects of the restoration project, and to hire a videographer to document the entire process.

Then he tracked down the orchestrion. It was being restored in Baltimore for a California collector.

Durward Center, the Baltimore man undertaking the restoration, had embarked on a career of caring for pipe organs based on a 1969 trip he'd made to Columbus from Kentucky as a teenager to see that instrument at Zaharakos. Moravec visited him, as well as the California man. Eventually,

an intricate deal involving a three-way trade of such organs was executed.

The Zaharako family generously extended help with Moravec's research of the business's history. He amassed drawers of files containing photographs, business documents and blueprints for such fixtures as the soda fountain and backbar.

Preserving history

Among the papers in his possession is the original rent receipt for space in what was then known as the Keller Building, dated January 1900. Pictures of various generations of Zaharakos throughout the years working the counter and in the kitchen have been displayed on the museum side of the restaurant.

Anticipating a book about the entire undertaking, he documented every

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detail of his research. His war room is filled with binders on the history of soda fountains, project visits to other ice cream parlors and candy shops, and even movies with soda-fountain references.

As restoration proceeded, he started to give thought to what kinds of modern touches to the menu would complement the vintage offerings, such as green rivers, sundaes and gom sandwiches, he intended to offer. He enlisted Doug Van Epps, chef-owner of Cooks and Company, to review the original recipes, recommend additions and train the kitchen staff.

Getting involved in making the ice cream was a natural for Moravec. "The way we manufacture our products at Applied Laboratories is a continuous process, so it was easy to apply to ice cream," he notes. He joined the National Ice Cream Retailers Association to learn the specifics.

The grand opening, attended by more than 3,000 people, occurred in June 2009. When he unlocked the front door in the wee hours that morning, he noticed three young men who had

camped out on the sidewalk all night. He gave them a tour before the crowds arrived.

The business is clearly thriving, paying its way with its cash flow. The upstairs banquet room stays busy with wedding receptions, birthday parties and business meetings.

In May 2009, Zaharakos won a regional historic preservation award from the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana. Easter Seals of Bartholomew County chose the Zaharakos facade for its 2009 Christmas ornament.

Moravec's collection of soda fountains, mechanical music boxes, ice cream parlor furniture and other vintage items has overflowed the museum and now takes up considerable space in the Blairex warehouse as well as his home.

"This takes up any time I have when I'm not running the pharmaceuticals business," he says.

He knew he'd achieved what he'd envisioned one day when Jim Zaharako paid a visit. He recalls that "Jim looked upward and said, 'You'd love it, Uncle Lewie.'"