Irish Nachos have become a staple of local identity

J. Gilligan’s Bar and Grill’s improvised dish has led to a 40-year reign of flavorful fame.

**Scratch, a series deconstructing the food we eat to explore its history, variety and the way we consume it.**

**Irish Nachos**

**BY DAVID PETERSON**

Thousands of lights, lasers, projections and other special effects are traveling the country within a giant pyramid known as PY1. First stop: Arlington.

Standing 84-kilometer high, the touring pyramid-shaped entertainment venue will be located outside of Globe Life Park until March. Designed by Lune Rouge Entertainment (a Canadian entertainment company), PY1 opened last year in Montreal.

The company chose Arlington as its first U.S. city because of its location within the Metroplex, said Clos Vu-Eco, Lune Rouge Entertainment communications director.

Vu-Eco said PY1 is perfect for Arlington's entertainment scene because it is a unique destination that offers several visual shows.

PY1 offers two family-oriented shows, and its third show, "PY1 Nights," transforms the pyramid into a dance floor for guests who see it as "a place to hang out on Saturdays and select holidays.

PY1 Nights offers six themed worlds, and guests are encouraged to dress up to match the show's theme. The two remaining PY1 Night shows theme are "Fry Wonder" on Jan 15 and "Pop" on Feb. 1.

"We'll see some things moving, like a light glare that knits elements coming up and down from the ceiling," Vo-Eco said. "It's really an immersive, multimedia experience."

Vu-Eco said the pyramid was built according to the "principles of sacred geometry." Pyramids date all the way past the ancient Egyptians and their pyramids of gold but remain a relevant shape and symbol even today.

"It's ancient in the history of humans, but at the same time, it's incredibly current and modern," she said. "We feel like it's something that's very in line with the story of life and humanity."

PY1 creators hoped to create a new type of experience beyond just a nighttime with great music, said Jean Guibert, Lune Rouge Entertainment executive creative director. PY1 incorporates strong, vibrant lights and colors and encourages attendees to dress up and participate throughout the experience.

"It's kind of a magic box, basically," he said. "You are not a spectator, but the actor. You are literally yourself on stage at the center of it." Music reverberates throughout the audience because the entire structure of the pyramid is open and the floor is equipped with speakers.

Yokohama resident Keishi Harita attended PY1 Night twice; he was excited to check out the new venue and its musical attractions.

What drew him back for a second time, he said, was the pyramid's unique design and layout. While most venues have a set stage or direction for attendees to be looking at PY1 Nights doesn't restrict its guests to a set direction. The party flowed freely throughout the pyramid.

"The show was all around you," he said. "There’s no, like, getting around it. It’s like you were on the show itself. Costumed performers circulated throughout the crowd, interacting and dancing with guests. Lights and lasers bounced off of their colorful, sparkling sequined outfits as they danced on the bodies across the dance floor."

"It’s kind of like being in your own private concert," Harita said. "It’s kind of like being in a rave or party at a festival, it throws everyone into the visuals instead of putting the visuals directly in front of them to watch."

Muham Nguyen, PY1 performer and entertainer, said the venue's ambience is one that most people have never experienced. None of the dance routines are choreographed because the dancers simply flow with each other and the crowd.

"We’re definitely just going off of the vibe," Nguyen said. The dancers themselves are more like performers on stage, he said, because it is difficult to see them.

The dancers have even been led by a local community, she said. The majority of the artists and performers are from the Metroplex. Each time that PY1 Nights has been offered, the venue sold out.

Once the current shows are perfected, Guibert said Lune Rouge Entertainment hopes to incorporate visual reality elements for a more enhanced experience.

And eventually, the company plans to design additional pyramids. They dubbed the initial pyramid PY1, and the second would be called PY2 and so on. As they continue to build new pyramids, the goal is to play the same shows in different cities at the same time by using multiple pyramids.

Lune Rouge Entertainment plans to visit three U.S. cities each year. After leaving Montreal, it took over 70 trucks to transport the deconstructed pyramid to Arlington, Guibert said. Advertising senior Daisy Orozco said the company stays in touch and thinks it’s cool that Arlington can offer an experience like PY1 Nights for local students.

"It brings people in Arlington to- gether that obviously have similar interests in that," she said. "Which is kind of rare because you don’t have to travel anywhere for that, like with Coach-ella. It’s so close and you can just jump on the train and be there."
Nachos
tutorial from page 5

“So, this may kind of be the luck of the Irish, if you will,” said Ford. Ford had various colored ceramic serving skillets which would hold the traditional nachos J. Gilligan’s still serves today. The day Ford saw he had run out of baskets to put his fries in, they were cooking round, cottage fries. When those fries were ready, Ford took them out of the basket and reached for a skillet. The next steps came together naturally, as if he were making regular nachos. He reached for the cheese — shredded, Wisconsin cheddar cheese — and spread it over the potatoes. Ford followed the process through, adding jalapeños, tomatoes, and onions next. The next step stayed the same on the traditional nachos prep. Instead of melting the cheese in their cheese melter, or salamander, Ford did the next best thing. “I just popped ‘em in the microwave,” he said. “That made that cheese for about a minute and a half.”

J. Gilligan’s doesn’t use the microwave to cook but rather to just melt the cheese, Ford said. It’s better to heat the Irish Nachos since it doesn’t make the plate so hot, and it can finish up the cheese through, adding jalapeños, tomatoes, and onions next. “Like jalapeños, probably extra jalapeños,” she said. “With ranch.”

Traditional nachos may include hot sauce or guacamole on the side. For J. Gilligan’s original recipe, it’s sour cream. Ford calls it “the secret sauce.”

For the customers Dowell serves, ranch is often their go-to sauce. “A lot of people love sour cream, but it spreads out and the more it gives a milder flavor.”

Ford added, “People oftentimes ask, what’s the secret, you know, of the Irish Nachos? The secret is two things: We use fried potatoes, and the other is the cheese,” he said. “That’s the key.”

The Impact

For Cathy O’Neal, Levitt Pavilion communication director, she describes herself as a purist when it comes to the Irish Nachos. If you will, she’ll ask about the Irish Nachos, and she’ll reply with glee. “At this point, I’m, like, part Irish Nacho.”

O’Neal said the bands will often ask for local food when they visit Arlington, and Ford will provide them dinner from J. Gilligan’s. Whenever a band takes a look at the green menu, O’Neal said they’ll ask about the Irish Nachos, and she’ll reply with glee.

“Yeah, like, the most decadent, potatoes and cheese, gooey, wonderful thing ever, and they have to try them,” she said.

There’s been at least one person from every state who has come to visit J. Gilligan’s in its ten-year span, Ford said, and he credits a bulk of the credit to the Irish Nachos. What keeps the customers is the sense of walking into a place that feels like family.

That’s what keeps Granbury resident Debbie Burns coming back for more. For Burns, the visits to J. Gilligan’s come with celebrations, visits with her mother-in-law and enjoying a food she has experienced with almost four generations at the same table.

“From tried to make it at home, it wouldn’t work,” she said.

Dowell said the dish has had a huge impact in the community. Everyone in the area, she said, especially the older generation, knows about the Irish Nachos. “Those are a huge staple in Arlington,” she said.

Everyone always has a story when they come into J. Gilligan’s. Dowell said especially when it comes to this potato dish and Randy Ford. “The Irish Nachos literally changed the entire history of J. Gilligan’s,” Dowell said. “That gave us an identity.”

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Wednesday, January 22, 2020 The Shorthorn Page 7

ONLINE
To see how J. Gilligan’s famous Irish Nachos are made, check out our video of this process online at Shorthorn.com/videos.

Nachos continued from page 5

The Variety

Ford said. “And I said, ‘Is this the recipe for these?’” His grandmother, who had been working at the restaurant for forty years, said, “I made them myself in my kitchen. I don’t know how.”

“I like jalapeños, probably extra jalapeños,” she said. “With ranch.”

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The Impact

For Cathy O’Neal, Levitt Pavilion communication director, she describes herself as a purist when it comes to the Irish Nachos, and loves the potatoes, cheese and sour cream of the dish.

“I even try to tell you how many Irish Nachos J. Gilligan’s have sold,” the UTA alumna said with a laugh. “At this point, I’m, like, part Irish Nacho.”

The Levitt Pavilion hosts many out-of-town bands, some from out-of-state places like New York and even a few international ones. O’Neal said the bands will often ask for local food when they visit Arlington, and Ford will provide them dinner from J. Gilligan’s.

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