

Old-timers remember Lair Hill Bistro as neighborhood market

By Polina Olsen
The Southwest Portland Post

Sara Hart likes the “Turkey Peach Chutney” sandwich but others prefer the “Lair Hill Veggie.” Each weekday neighborhood regulars order their favorites at the cozy storefront cafe.

“Students spend a lot of time sipping coffee and having their meals here,” Hart says referring to the nearby Na-

tional College of Natural Medicine. She opens her laptop at a quiet back table. The one next to the ancient woodstove.

Since 1914, the old Lair Hill market has served the community, first as a grocery for Jewish and Italian immigrants, and later as a trendy café—Lair Hill Bistro. Artifacts and mementos throughout the restaurant reveal the neighborhood and building’s interesting history.

Cheryl Riegler and her husband, Richard Varner bought the café 10 years ago after owner, Esther Schulhaus, decided to sell. Schulhaus lived upstairs from the grocery like her parents, Abraham and Rose Weinstein. When Riegler and Varner took over, they moved in.

“She was my great-aunt, we called her Tanta Raizel,” says Leo Greenstein remembering Rose Weinstein and her five daughters. When Greenstein grew up, the neighborhood was mainly Italian and Jewish immigrants.

The Weinstains and his parents were from Russia. He remembers “an old fashioned store” where the owner collected groceries as customers stood at the counter and read their list. “They had a little room in the back near the kitchen where we’d go and talk. She had a terrific collection of china.”

Marvin Wolf, the Schulhaus’ nephew, often visited his grandparents, the Weinstains. “Abraham was a strong, handsome gentleman with a white mustache,” he recalls, “and she had a great beer stein collection. They had both a gas and wood stove in that lower kitchen; It was regal - a beautiful wood stove.”

When daughter Esther Weinstein married Albert Schulhaus, they moved upstairs and closed the store. Schulhaus was slender, maybe skinny and about six foot seven. He arrived from Germany in 1940 at age 33. When the couple reopened the grocery in 1977,



Katya Varner makes change for a customer. The sign Slim's Grocery belonged to a previous owner. (Post photo by Polina Olsen)

they called it *Slim's*. The café still displays the sign above the bar.

Paul Payton, 75, has lived in the neighborhood all his life. “I remember horses and a vegetable cart,” he said. Payton, a handyman, often helped Esther Schulhaus with her rental properties, including the home he now owns.

“It was one of the last grocery stores in the neighborhood. It looked just like it does now on the outside,” Payton said. “On the inside, the counter was on the left, and they stood behind it all the time.”

Payton carried Slim Schulhaus upstairs toward the end of his life. Esther Schulhaus gave him her husband’s hat when he died.

Esther Schulhaus never understood how her neighborhood gentrified. “This is an old, shabby neighborhood, not historical,” she said in a 1977 Oregon Journal interview. “To me, something historic should be something elegant.” Still, by 1990 “the quiche-eaters were moving in” according to then neighborhood association chair John May.

By that time, Erika Steinhardt had replaced the old market with a trendy place for soup, sandwiches and coffee. She had a small seating area and shelves of groceries off to one side,

mostly stocked for the Schulhaus’ who still lived upstairs. “They had Manishewitz, stuff like that,” says current owner Cheryl Riegler. “We expanded it from a deli to a sit down bistro kind-of restaurant.”

Today, most customers are from neighborhood businesses and schools, Riegler says, including OHSU, ADP, and the natural medicine college. The small dinner menu includes pasta and pizza, and they serve the lunch menu all evening. A wooden bar accommodates people stopping for cocktails, wine, or beer on their way home from work, and neighbors come for breakfast and coffee before leaving.

Eli Head takes a coffee break and sits outside with friend Angela Schroeder. A recent arrival to Portland, he would “come get coffee before I’d go downtown and drop off resumes.” He found the café a focal point for the neighborhood and finally decided to work here. He explains, “It’s a cool way to meet the neighbors.”

The Lair Hill Bistro (formerly known as the Old Lair Hill Market) is located at 2823 S.W. First Ave. Hours are Monday – Thursday 7 a.m. to 8 p.m., Friday 7 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Closed Saturday and Sunday. Their telephone number is 503.279.0200.

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