

Collecting Cafeterias

In 1891, the Kansas City, MO, YWCA established what some food-industry historians consider the first cafeteria. However, some believe that the American cafeteria was started in 1895, when a New York self-service Chicago restaurateur named his business a “cafeteria” (which is actually Spanish for “coffee shop,” though the American version of the term is now in use around the world.).

California’s cafeteria explosion began in 1905, when a restaurant boasting self-service advertised itself as “food that can be seen” and “no tips.” The idea was so popular that by the 1920s some called Los Angeles “Sunny Cafeteria.”

At one time, upscale cafeteria-style restaurants dominated the culture of the Southern United States, and to a lesser extent the Midwest. There were numerous prominent chains of them: Bickford's, Morrison's Cafeteria, Piccadilly Cafeteria, and S&W Cafeteria among them. Currently, two Midwestern chains still exist, Sloppy Jo's Lunchroom and Manny's, which are both located in Illinois. There were also a number of smaller chains, usually located in and around a single city. These institutions, with the exception of K&W, went into a decline in the 1960s with the rise of fast food and were largely finished off in the 1980s by the rise of "casual dining". A few chains — particularly Luby's and Piccadilly Cafeterias (which took over the Morrison's chain in 1998) — continue to fill some of the gap left by the decline of the older chains. Some of the smaller Midwestern chains, such as MCL Cafeterias centered on Indianapolis, are still very much in business.

As cafeterias require few employees, they are often found within a larger institution, catering to the clientele of that institution (schools, colleges and their residence halls, department stores, etc. Although some of such institutions self-operate their cafeterias, many outsource their

cafeterias to a food service management company or lease space to independent businesses to operate food service facilities. The three largest food service management companies servicing institutions are Aramark, Compass Group, and Sodexo.

Jo Wilding, TX, had 337 such covers in May 1993, but there are a lot more than that out there...And, they’re almost all *old!* They’re definitely a nice bit of cultural nostalgia.

