

## River City Restaurateur **Meet Mike Fleck**

By Steve Cook

It's the mid-seventies, and Northern Virginia native, Mike Fleck, is fresh out of college, with a degree in Business Administration from the University of Kentucky. Not having decided on a career path, Fleck does what many a young man has done before him. He gets a job as a bartender...in an Alexandria restaurant.

When his employers, Cliff and Sally Klein, open a restaurant in Richmond, Fleck decides to check our city out for himself. He, and his brother, Don, who was the city planner for Alexandria at the time, head south, find an old house in the Fan, and come to the conclusion that it would be the perfect spot for a restaurant.

"It was a rather Bohemian sort of place," Fleck recalls of the Grace Street building, which he and his brother pretty much renovated with their own hands. The restaurant was known as Mad King Ludwig's, and its opening, in 1975, marked Fleck's entry into the world of restaurant ownership. In the succeeding years, Fleck also opened the Jade Elephant, which he describes as, "the bar portion of Ludwig's." He operated the Village Café, in the Fan, and Poor Richard's in Downtown Richmond as well.

Move forward to the mid-nineties, and Don

Fleck is no longer involved in the business. "Don came to the conclusion that the restaurant business is for lunatics," Fleck laughs. He and a new business partner, Scott Poates, come up with a great idea for a restaurant to be located in Shockoe Bottom. "It was my partner's concept," Fleck, a soft-spoken man, says modestly.

Keep in mind, this was fifteen years ago, when the Bottom was just beginning to be developed commercially. The two restaurateurs agree that a fifties-style diner would be popular. Thus was born River City Diner. Today, Poates owns and operates the Shockoe Bottom location and Fleck owns and operates the Bellgrade River City Diner in Midlothian. Each of the partners maintains half ownership of the small, local chain's Northside restaurant.

Eateries come and go for any number of reasons, as Mike Fleck has personally discovered. In the world of restaurants, fifteen years is a lifetime. So to what does Fleck attribute River City Diner's continued success? "It's a concept that appeals to both the Boomer's and to the kids," he says. And, he's right. All three River City Diners evoke memories of the Happy Days for many of the fifty and older crowd. But, the fun, fifties atmosphere, with good ol' rock 'n roll music playing on the jukebox, is also something that attracts the kids as well. And, while Fleck admits that teenagers aren't among his number one customers, he says that many from that group are discovering that it's a great place for a cheap date.

But River City's success is due to more than just the fun, nostalgic atmosphere. It truly, and perhaps primarily, comes down to two things...good food at a fair price. That's something that appeals to diners of all ages.

Fleck is quick to tell you that the diner does, indeed, serve good food. "Our meats are never frozen," he says. "And our milkshakes are real milkshakes. Everything is homemade."

There are other factors to which one can point



Mike Fleck

as keys to River City Diner's ongoing success, not the least of which is Mike Fleck, himself. As Jimmy News, River City Diner's corporate chef and marketing director tells me when Fleck steps away from our table to speak to a guest, "He (Fleck) is a class act...a real family man."

Mike Fleck, who lives in Chesterfield County with his wife and two teenage kids, is just that. He and his wife homeschool both of their children. As President of the Central Virginia Homeschool Athletic Association (CHVAA), Fleck works tirelessly to promote athletics for homeschoolers. "Often these kids don't have an opportunity to become involved in team sports," he says. "Our goal is to encourage the development of their God-given athletic abilities."

Fleck will soon be adding a "Hall of Fame" trophy case in the Bellgrade restaurant to showcase the achievements of homeschoolers who participate in CHVAA events.

Fleck is also involved in a number of other community causes (see accompanying story) "We want to do even more," he says. "This is our community. (Being involved) makes us feel good. It's a win-win situation."

Mike Fleck has spent the better part of his life, over thirty years, in the restaurant business. And he tells me that he's having more fun than ever. So, are there any plans to expand the River City chain? "I think about it," he says. "But then I have to admit to myself that I'm not getting any younger. Sometimes I have to fill in for someone in the kitchen and then it all comes back to me. This is hard work."



Photography by Vince Robertson