



# Drive-ins, Dives, & Diners

## Discover the hidden treasures of our south county

Soaring rents, unbearable traffic jams, and gentrification are rapidly changing Santa Cruz County, but some beloved remnants of the past have survived the onslaught. It is still possible to sit down and enjoy a classic meal at Watsonville's own answer to "Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives." Don't misunderstand. A "dive" is not a bad thing. On the contrary, a "dive" is clean, homey, and unpretentious, a place where everyone is welcome and the food is served just how you like it. The only problem with many eateries like these is that they get discovered, become trendy, and go downhill. That's where Watsonville is different. In a volatile industry where more than 60 percent of restaurants don't survive the first year, Watsonville is home to a number of restaurants that have stood the test of time. Three establishments in particular endure as local legends. One cafe earned a young customer's affection, so much so that years later he stepped in to become its owner. Down the road, a tiny stand serves three generations of a family's hospitality along with its delicious hot dogs. A third eatery aspires to be all things to all customers — and has done just that for more than 30 years.

Photo illustration: WWD



By Elizabeth Ivanovich

### Beach Street Cafe Beach

Beach Street Cafe opened in 1979, establishing a clientele that's stayed true through several ownership changes. One of these regulars was German Lopez, who often came in with his father when he was a child. Over the years, he found himself drawn to the cafe by its history as well as its food. When Beach Street Cafe needed new management, he was inspired: "I thought, 'I'm gonna go in there and bring the Beach Street Cafe back!'" Lopez was already working two jobs at that point, but with the support of his family, he took over Beach Street in July 2015. Lopez is especially grateful for the guidance from his uncle, Jose Gonzalez, who owns Showtime Pizzeria in Aptos. "He's been right behind me, leading me through everything from paperwork, portion control, inventory, et cetera. I think he was the key to all this."

While Lopez is new to the restaurant business, he knows what makes customers

happy. "It's important to keep the breakfast and lunch menu the same," he notes. "We have a lot of regulars." At the same time, he hopes to expand the meat and seafood options on the menu, and add more of his mother's Mexican recipes. His menu additions of chicken fried steak, the chicken pesto sandwich, and crab Benedict have found a following already. His own favorite dish is the huevos rancheros, which boasts "homemade salsa, mom's recipe for rice and really good beans, and our own marinated asada." There isn't enough time in the day to enjoy all of Beach Street's treats, which is why Lopez hopes to push the restaurant's closing time to 5 or 6 p.m. in the near future.

(Top) Referred to as Whisky Hill during the 1800s, over the past three decades The Wooden Nickel has become a local landmark at this historic crossroads.

### Beach Street Cafe

**Where:** 435 W Beach Street,  
Watsonville, California

**Contact:** (831) 722-2233

**Hours:** Monday - Sunday  
7:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.



(Above) Beach Street Cafe is located amidst packing sheds and food processing plants; if you are looking for a restaurant with good food and character – this is it.

### Taylor Brother's Hot Dogs

In 1949, brothers James G. and Melvin Taylor (along with James' wife Pauline) opened their first hot dog stand in Delano. After opening another location in Porterville in 1950 and moving the Delano stand to Visalia in 1952, the brothers heard about an ideal spot for a third. A Central Coast town had property downtown, close to schools and a Fox Theater. "The four traveled to Watsonville, saw the location, and bought it in 1954," recalls Matt Taylor, grandson of James G. Taylor. The stand opened on the corner of Maple and

Union Streets, roughly two blocks away from Taylor Brothers' current Watsonville location.

When Melvin passed away, he left his half of the business to James L. Taylor, Matt's father. Matt began working at Taylor Brothers after finishing high school in 1994. "My grandma was insistent that I learn the business from the ground up," he notes. He became manager in 1997, and inherited his grandfather's half of the business in 2002.

As a third-generation Taylor, Matt is mindful of the company's philosophy. "My grandparents always prided themselves on



(Above) A full bar, Wurlitzer jukebox, and big screen TV combined with amazing food it's no wonder so many locals call the Wooden Nickel Restaurant their second home.



(Above) Smothered in cheese and home-made salsa, the Beach Street Cafe's Huevos Rancheros and Carne Asada are always a favorite.

(Below) The Wooden Nickel's legendary turkey sandwiches and salads are made from fresh turkeys which are prepared daily.

...serving a quality product at a good price with fast, friendly service," he affirms. "Over the years, we've held true to that same mindset. I think people have grown accustomed to that and appreciate that we don't deviate from it. Now, we have a fifth generation of hot dog eaters."

Watsonville's expansion has spread out downtown's customer base, so Taylor is always alert to new ways of attracting business. "The biggest difficulty I have is moving our business into the technological era we live in today, without losing sight of our time honored traditions and old-school feel," he says. Happily, some things never change as time marches on: "I really enjoy hearing people's memories and stories of our business."



### The Wooden Nickel

**Where:** 1819 Freedom Boulevard  
Freedom, California

**Contact:** (831) 724-2600

**Hours:** Monday - Sunday  
9:00 a.m. - 2:00 a.m.



(Right) The menu at Taylor's Hot Dogs is simple, just hot dogs and drinks – but be sure to order two hot dogs as they are so delicious you can't eat just one.



(Above) This classic drive-in seems frozen in time since the 1950s; Taylor Brother's Hot Dogs in Watsonville is not to be missed.

### The Wooden Nickel

Owner Leo Welsh admits that when he bought The Wooden Nickel in 1983, "I didn't expect to stay here this long!" He owes the restaurant's success to its exceptional versatility. Not only does it feature a full bar, it serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner in a casual atmosphere. This gives customers unusual flexibility in their choices. "We have lunch and dinner at the same time. People can have the

lunch sandwich at night if that's what they want, or they can get the full-on rib eye with potatoes, vegetables, and chowder."

Welsh has seen food trends come and go, but he understands his customer base. While he happily fulfills more requests for health-conscious choices such as salads, he adds, "A lot of people [still] want their hamburgers and fries." In any case, skirt steak is the overwhelming Wooden Nickel favorite. In

spite of increased cost and scarcity of the cut (Welsh estimates that 90% of U.S. skirt steak is exported to Japan to satisfy consumer demand there), visitors clamor for it at all hours of the day. Customers "come in on Sunday for skirt steak and eggs," Welsh confides. "It's strange. People want their meat, you know?"

While Welsh hopes to travel the world sometime in the future, there is audible pride and sentiment in his voice when he discusses The Wooden Nickel. "[I watch] local kids come in here, and three generations later they'll bring their grandkids," he says. "For me, it's a really nice, social thing. It's a fun part [of it], for the community to gather." 🍷



(Above) Reminiscent of an painting by Edward Hopper, the counter at the Beach Street Cafe runs the entire length of the restaurant and attracts a wide range of patrons that can include farmers, truck drivers, and even local artists.

### Taylor Brother's Hot Dogs

**Where:** 336 Union Street  
Watsonville, California

**Contact:** (831) 722-2402

**Hours:** Monday – Sunday  
10:00 a.m. – 1:00 a.m.