

# IN THE HEARTLAND

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By Mitchell Brown

Photographs by David J. Schwartz - Pics On Route 66



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As the sun sets on another day in the quiet city of Litchfield, Illinois, the gentle hum of a neon sign becomes slightly audible. This is accompanied by the bright glow of green and red lights splashing across the brick wall of a century-old establishment. It's a neon sign that announces to the people of Litchfield and hungry travelers who are merely passing through — whether they be Illinois locals or Route 66 enthusiasts — that this is the Ariston Cafe, and they're welcome inside. Located across from the Litchfield Museum & Route 66 Welcome Center, the Ariston sits at a focal point of Route 66 in Illinois and has been feeding the citizens of Litchfield since 1930. However, that's not where its story begins.

The business began officially about twenty miles away in the neighboring town of Carlinville, where a man named Pete Adam opened up shop. Born in Greece in 1890 with the birthname of Panos Adam, Pete arrived in the states when he was twelve years old and changed his name upon arriving at Ellis Island with his family. He would eventually return to his home country to fight in the Balkan Wars, which took place between 1912 and 1913 —he would've been around 22 at the time — fighting for the Greek army. He eventually returned to the U.S. before the first World War broke out and made his home in Roswell, New Mexico, where he found work as a coal miner. Eventually, Pete decided to head to the Midwest and settled in his new home in Carlinville, Illinois. The decision was predicated on the fact that he had friends and family in the area. This would alter his route in life and put into motion the business that would become his livelihood.

## Taking the First Steps

In 1924, Pete opened the Ariston Cafe. However, at the time of its opening, it wasn't a restaurant. It was a store that made and sold candy. A local doctor planted the seed to expand, stating that the town needed a restaurant. The original location was built in 1854 and was located on Route 4, the spiritual predecessor to Route 66. The operative word here is "original" because this isn't where it would stay for long. The winds soon began to change for the country's highway system because the highway re-aligned into what would soon become Route 66. This resulted in the highway bypassing Carlinville altogether and instead it traveled through Litchfield.

"Pete knew that Route 66 was coming through the area and knew that he had to be a part of it," said Will Law, current co-owner of the Ariston. "Transportation was huge [business] as Litchfield was founded due to many trains converging here, sparking its importance to the area. That meant lots of people."

By 1929, the café was relocated to Litchfield, at the intersection of West Kirkham Street and Route 66, in a

building that Pete leased, which today is the Litchfield Museum & Route 66 Welcome Center. The current location was built from the ground up by Henry A. Vassel for \$3,625.36 — roughly \$85,000 when adjusted for inflation — just across the intersection, and the café officially moved in on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1935. The timing of the café's relocation was simultaneously not ideal, but also prosperous. "Not ideal" in the sense that the Great Depression had hit the country, but prosperous because a café was considered an inexpensive business decision (all things considered), and people still needed to eat and socialize. The location was also prime real estate since, by 1936, the Illinois stretch of Route 66 was getting the heaviest load of traffic in the state, connecting Chicago — the country's second-largest city at that point — to St. Louis.

That's not to say that times were easy for the restaurant; they faced difficulties like anyone else at the time, but they still managed to get through the Depression. Pressure helps create diamonds, and adversity helps build integrity. Hoping to attract more travelers, Pete installed a pair of gas pumps in front of the building — a common trend for restaurants on the Mother Road — and eventually installed slot machines. By 1937, Pete would marry his wife, Emily (whom he met after the war), and have three kids, Elaine, Marika, and Nick. The latter would eventually take over the café from his father in 1966, but by the time he was a teenager, he was already part of the family business. "I started working there when I was 12 or 13 years old," said Nick Adam, former owner of the Ariston Cafe. "I played football throughout high school, but I still worked every Saturday and Sunday as a waiter and sometimes in the kitchen."

## A Little Ingenuity

By 1940, the café hit a hurdle. Following the end of the Great Depression, heavy traffic steadily became a prominent problem. The two-lane blacktop of Route 66 couldn't handle the influx of cars, so a four-lane bypass was created to help streamline and decongest traffic. This created a single but no less prominent issue for the café: the bypass ran on the opposite side of the building.

A building can't be physically rotated 180 degrees, and Pete knew that. Rather than wait out the storm and hope that the customers would eventually return, he devised a simple but effective tactic: install neon signs on the other side of the building to capture the attention of travelers on the bypass, indicating the café's presence. Two signs were installed that said "Ariston" and "Better Place to Eat." Not only did the plan work, but it also had a long-term effect on other businesses, "It was built to help draw attention to the building and helped state congressmen to justify putting in lanes for people to pull off and utilize services off the road, which the café didn't have when the new stretch was built," said Law. "Those signs in the rear are still there and function daily."

In 1966, at the age of 75, Pete Adam passed away. Shortly before his passing, Nick and his wife, Demi—who had married that January—had taken over the restaurant. "I figured my father was 75 and too old to be running the restaurant, so I talked to my wife — her parents were in the restaurant business in Chicago, so we discussed it and she agreed," said Nick. "We decided to quit our jobs we had waiting for us in Pittsburgh and planned to take over the



Will Law and Kara Steffens.

restaurant for two or three years and then just sell it. The next year, we had our first child and ended up having three, which changed the idea. So, we kept the restaurant."

By the time the couple arrived, the location had undergone some changes. They got rid of the slot machines sometime around Prohibition, and the gas pumps were long gone due to gasoline being rationed by the government during WWII. The concrete island and light pole would eventually be disposed of, and the added space would lead to more room for parking.

The transition of ownership to Nick led to very few changes in the overall day-to-day of the restaurant. Even the decommissioning of Route 66 in 1985 didn't drastically affect business, seeing as the café is just a few blocks away from the downtown area. Nick's most substantial change, and the most visible, was the addition of a banquet wing on the north side of the building and new front doors and awnings, which were all installed sometime in the 70s. This proved to be a smart investment, as the banquet wing would quickly be used for wedding receptions, funeral dinners, and parties. Nick and Demi would go on to run the café for 52 years—by 2004, their eldest son Paul and his wife, Joy, briefly joined the family business. Around 2014, there were plans to potentially sell the restaurant, and a few offers were even put into place, but were quickly shot down. The timing just wasn't right, yet. But in 2018, Marty and Kara Steffens and Will and Michele Law entered the scene.

## The Proper Credentials

The two couples were no strangers to customer service or the challenge of running a business. Before they set their eyes on the Ariston, Marty and Kara operated (and continue to operate) Maverick Steaks & Spirits, just around the corner from the café. Starting his career in 1985, Marty worked at the then-Maverick Steakhouse until 1998, when he bought the location from the previous owner, Russ Hruby, who was ready to retire and began selling each of his locations — about eight in total — to the working general managers. Kara started working at Maverick in 1991 as a cashier and worked her way up to assistant general manager before they bought the location. Kara now runs the location after Marty took an early retirement around 2004.

Will and Michele came aboard to Maverick in 1995, having previously worked at the Hilton Hotel in Springfield, Illinois. The pair had experience running the goings-on of a restaurant. Will had managed the Hilton's Garden Terrace Café and room service concierge lounge, while Michele came aboard as his assistant and worked at the Hilton's more formal restaurant, City Lights, on 30. They began to work at the Maverick, Will as the manager and Michele as a "Jill of All Trades" who would tackle whichever role was needed of her, whether it be serving, cashiering, or just overall holding down the fort.

Will stayed on as the manager for a long time, but eventually, the workload and stress of the job took its toll



Ariston Cafe interior.

on him, and he left in 2017. “I was extremely burnt out.... I worked a lot. Always came in early and always stayed late. Striving to be the best is more than a full-time job,” explained Law, who would step down to work at the assisted living facility of Hillsboro Area Hospital, but found the office setting of clerical work wasn’t what he was built for. “It was intriguing, but I found out real quick that it wasn’t for me. I walk and talk and require something to do all the time. I need those ten small fires a day. I love organized chaos; that’s where I do my best work.”

By the eleventh month mark, Will had his fill of the hospital but had no intentions of leaving yet. That was until the information that was trickling through the acquaintances he had at the hospital gave him some burgeoning ideas. Among his fellow employees were friends of Nick and Demi, and word came to Will’s ears that they wanted to sell the Ariston, and that Nick was thinking out loud that if the right offer were to come along, he just might take it. “We were fortunate enough to entertain many folks from over 50 countries traveling 66,” said Nick. “But by that time, I was 80 years old, and we didn’t get a lot of vacations when we were running the business. I thought it was about time to relax for a while.” This piqued Will’s interest, and he knew of a few other people who might also be interested to hear this information.

## Handing Over the Keys

In July 2018, the ink was dry, cash was exchanged, and hands were shaken, and after more than 90 years of being run by one family, the Steffens and Laws were now the official new owners of the Ariston Cafe. The four of them were all familiar with the restaurant, having all been Illinois natives and growing up around the area, so it didn’t take much convincing to get everyone on board. The deal ended up with the Steffens having a majority investment in the restaurant, while the Laws both invested in it and provided all the sweat equity needed to run the business on a day-to-day basis. Michele works full-time at Expedia as a market

manager, so her time is spent mainly there, but she still has a hands-on approach to assisting with the Ariston and coming in, when needed, to help host, wait on tables, bus them, and do what she can to help the restaurant run smoothly. Even their kids come to help out, so no one gets spread too thin.

A part of the charm of a family business is the “family” aspect, and just because humans are known to be adaptable doesn’t mean that they enjoy the concept of change. So, when the Ariston came under new management, there was some minor pushback

from the regulars early on. This would eventually recede when it became clear that there wouldn’t be any toes to be stepped on and no changes to be made—from the booths, counter seating, white linen cloth covered tables, down to the menu that’s stayed relatively the same since Nick took over so long ago. Beyond the local regulars, the sheer volume of foreign Route 66 visitors is a demographic all unto itself. Between being in such close proximity to the Litchfield Museum, Jubelt’s Bakery, and the Skyview Drive-In, Law estimates that they get somewhere around 12,000 to 15,000 European travelers every season, with many visitors making multiple trips a year.

As with most historic establishments, time has done its work on the café’s building. Architectural and general maintenance needed to be done to keep the restaurant open and up to code so as not to get shut down. Converting old water and sewer lines to be up to date, fixing the floors, and tending to interior walls with extensive water damage were all factors that needed to be accommodated. Fortunately, they were able to acquire a grant to help work on renovations and even update the interior, while also keeping the classic feel of the place. “We’d like to replace lighting throughout the dining room to the era of the restaurant and try to match lighting in booths that are original to the building and replace artwork to represent historic Litchfield and honor Route 66,” said Law. “So, new look, but same old charm. Maybe better?”

In 2024, the Ariston hosted a ribbon cutting for its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration party, with the Adam family and members of the community in attendance. It was a true celebration. You only have to read the café’s guest book, which is filled with stories of childhood memories and heartfelt reviews, to appreciate the café’s deep-rooted place in the town’s history. It’s a mainstay for both the community of Litchfield and diehard Route 66 journeymen alike. Middle America is dotted with historic restaurants that offer a long-time family touch, but down in the heartland of Litchfield, this one’s neon signs shine a little extra bright.