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A love letter to ...

The Varsity

BY CAROLINE EUBANKS

The Varsity is the literal backdrop to my youth: I have photos there from the early 2000s, taken with disposable cameras, of my friends and me before Braves games at Turner Field and concerts at The Masquerade. After driving in from Marietta, my suburban pals and I would try to spot members of The Format from behind our Frosted Oranges. The Varsity red paper hats were the essential souvenir for our visiting cousins after a day at the aquarium; my siblings and I begrudgingly donned them, too, as we all ate our chili dogs and paprika-dusted fries. The fast-food spot felt like a second home, whether I was stopping for a bite or waving at the neon “V” sign from a gridlocked I-75.

Once called “the world’s largest drive-in,” The Varsity was opened in 1928 by entrepreneur Frank Gordy on the outskirts of the Georgia Tech campus. Though it started with just a take-out counter and six seats, it grew quickly, thanks in part to its five-cent hot dogs. In 1932, Gordy opened an outpost in Athens, which, as at Tech, became an essential pre-game ritual for University of Georgia students. The restaurant’s carhops, who proffered meals on a tray through many a driver’s side window, became celebrities in their own right—including Julius “Nipsey” Russell,

● The Varsity’s 45-foot “V” sign was installed in 2000; during the drive-in heyday of the 1950s, the restaurant employed nearly 130 carhops.

who entertained guests with his jokes at the original location in the 1940s before becoming a popular contestant on game shows like *Hollywood Squares*. The carhops were an indelible part of The Varsity experience until the Covid-19 pandemic forced an end to the service.

The Atlanta that surrounds the flagship restaurant has changed dramatically over the decades, most notably with the arrival of the Downtown Connector, whose nearby North Avenue exit opened in the 1950s. The Varsity has seen the expansion of the Georgia Tech campus, the 1996 Olympics (the Olympic Village was across the street), and the explosion of the local film industry. The Varsity even made its silver screen debut in the 2006 movie *We Are Marshall*, which used its art deco-style counter and retro Formica tables as a backdrop.

Some may call it a tourist trap, its food a gut bomb. Sure, you likely won’t spot it on any list of best Atlanta eateries, and the Michelin crowd probably won’t be found belling up to the counter for a peach pie. But we locals consider it part of the fabric of our city, as celebrated chef (and Powder Springs native) Joey Ward did when he created a tribute to The Varsity at his restaurant Georgia Boy: hot dog ice cream on a brioche roll, topped with caviar—all served in a Varsity hat.

Like its fellow Atlanta institution, Waffle House, The Varsity has its own language. The staff and regulars alike know that a “bag of rags” is potato chips and “Mary Brown steak” is a burger without the bun. The yells of *What’ll ya have?* don’t intimidate me as I take my spot in line, and I don’t need to consult a menu to order my usual: “a naked dog with strings,” aka a plain hot dog and fries.

Every time I dine here, I am embracing that teenager excited for a taste of the “big city.” I feel myself longing for the past while snapping photos on my iPhone and staying out without a curfew. ●

