



## Eat Like a King

Craving iconic burgers and a side of Elvis? Johnnie's serves up nostalgic Tupelo history

BY JENNIFER STEWART KORNEGAY

Every day, nearly two dozen people—some from far-flung places around the world—visit Johnnie's Drive-In with one thing in mind. These folks, a small percentage of the café's scores of daily patrons, flock to this culinary landmark in Tupelo, Mississippi, not only for a pimento cheese sandwich and golden onion rings, but also for the chance to sit in a seat once warmed by Elvis Presley. Opened in 1945, Johnnie's was still a new spot when a young and not-yet-famous Elvis would often pop in for a cheeseburger and an RC Cola. One day last summer, I decided to see what all the fuss was about.

I arrived at Johnnie's hungry for a snack. A bronze plaque identified the wooden booth that the rock and roll icon occupied during a 1956 visit to his hometown. The seat was claimed at the moment, so I grabbed a counter stool and marveled at the time capsule I'd stepped into: There were worn Formica-topped tables, and Elvis memorabilia—records, black-and-white photos, and newspaper clippings—adorned the walls.

"It's not retro. It's the real thing," said Christi White, who, with her husband, Craig, took over Johnnie's in 2020 from her parents (who bought it from the

original owners in 1987). "There've been no decor changes in decades."

While I opted for crispy fries and a thick strawberry milkshake, the cozy restaurant's bestseller is Elvis' go-to order: a doughburger with cheese. Also known by other names in Mississippi, such as slugburger, the dish was developed by Depression-era cooks who added filler to burger patties to stretch pennies. "It's just meat and flour and seasonings, and it's good," Craig said. "With fries and a drink, it rings up to about six dollars, so it's also cheap."

Neither the classic American diner cuisine nor echoes of the King are the sole reasons for the eatery's 81 years of success, however. Treating customers like royalty has been a crowning characteristic of the establishment and a key to its longevity, according to Christi. Indeed, Johnnie's is widely considered Tupelo's oldest eatery and one of the state's longest-operating restaurants. "We have personal relationships with our many regulars. We know their names and often their orders before they even speak," she said. "The locals keep us going; Elvis is just a bonus."

The nostalgia of having carhops take orders from patrons who prefer to stay in their vehicles provides additional appeal. "That's an experience you can't get at many other places today," Craig noted.

While regulars keep the fryers on, the Whites never tire of feeding the Elvis aficionados. Some guests wait for hours for their turn to sit in that hallowed spot, and they relish the moment, along with the food. "They'll sit in that booth as if Elvis had just left. They're so reverent," said Craig. "It's fun, and we feel lucky to be a part of such a special memory for them."

### If You Go

For more details, visit [tinyurl.com/elvisatehere](http://tinyurl.com/elvisatehere).

A freelance writer from Montgomery, Alabama, **JENNIFER STEWART KORNEGAY** fuels up at barbecue joints, mom-and-pop diners, and gas station cafés on her Southern travels.