

Thanks for the Memories



Village Coffee Shop at the Desert Inn in 1946. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

How diners came to be a staple

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Scarcity and the desert seem to go together. Nothing concentrates the mind and effort like scarcity. It makes every animal purposeful. Yet despite being a desert, there has been remarkable abundance here due to the ingenuity and industry of desert dwellers for more than a century.

Initial settlers planned to cultivate the land for "early ripening fruits" that could be sold in the coast markets at a profit. The extended growing season in the desert made crops spring forth with just the addition of water. In the 1880s, a consortium of San Francisco businessmen laid out hundreds of acres in stone fruits and citrus for an agricultural utopia named Palmdale, located where Smoke Tree Ranch would come to be. The streets in Palmdale were named

Date, Lemon, Palm and the like. The 11-year drought at the end of the 19th century doomed Palmdale and its fancifully named streets.

Judge McCallum had extensive orchards at the base of Mt. San Jacinto around what is now the center of Palm Springs, but his efforts eventually succumbed to the drought despite the Whitewater and Tahquitz irrigation ditches. The decade of the 1890s was one of slow desiccation. The days of

scratching in the desert sand for a meager existence were over with an incredibly audacious and ingenious scheme hatched in the early 20th century to bring water from the Colorado River to the Imperial Valley through the American Canal. The canal quenched the parched land and allowed for the development of industrial agriculture on a scale unimaginable decades before.

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Safeway Market in Palm Springs in 1955. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY PHOTOS /SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

Memories

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There were tribulations aplenty, but the desert, in an ironic twist, was eventually made bountiful.

Remarkable abundance and variety became available. As towns grew, specialty shops catered to almost every need, restaurants appeared and so did the diner. Not as fancy or intimidating as nightclubs and fine dining establishments, the diner was ubiquitous. Soren Ibsen, the president of the American Diner Association, founded in 1943 noted, "I usually don't eat out, but when I do, I prefer a quality diner." Most of the country agreed, and the Coachella Valley was no different.

One of the earliest desert eateries, Mustacio's offered simple food, and happened to be linked to gangsters, but the locals didn't seem to mind. Gangsters had to eat, too.

The Village Coffee Shop at the Desert Inn was streetside and offered a glimpse of the fine dining within the grounds. Not so fancy, but it did feature tablecloths. Later Louise's Pantry, with its basement kitchen, was the place for breakfast. Both diner and soda fountain, its robin's-egg blue counter chairs and booths hosted teenagers and adults alike for decades. Frank Sinatra was a regular at Huddle Springs, famous Gogie architecture diner and deli designed by William Cody.

There was even a harbinger of things to come: Tillie's Broiled Chicken To Take Home.

When not dining out, locals had a variety of shops from which to choose. Bakeries, ice cream parlors, liquor stores, butcher shops and sweet shops where delicacies of all sorts were easily had. Such abundance was only interrupted in the 1940s by wartime rations.



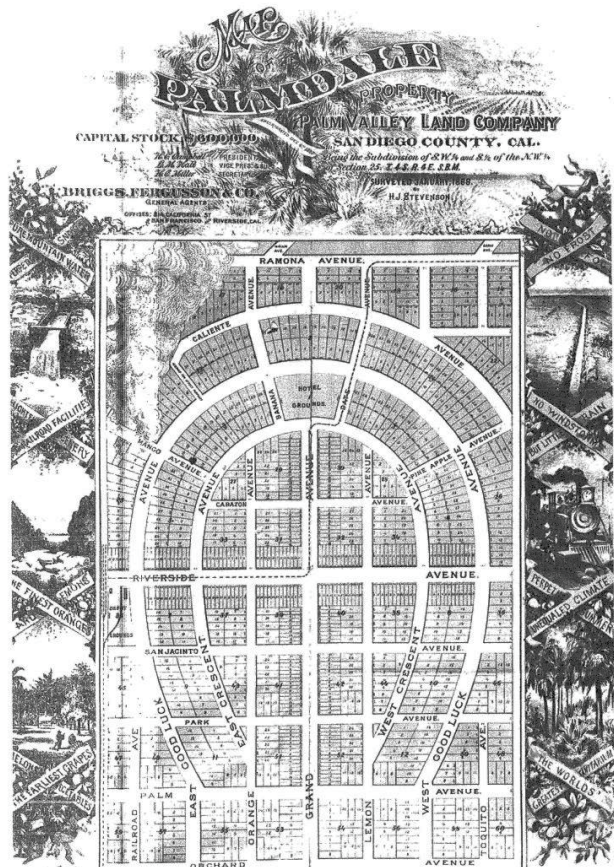
The interior of Louise's Pantry in the 1950s.

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There were lines for meat and butter, testing everyone's patience. But local farmers continued to provide the staples by making the desert produce.

The transition from individual shops to the newly-invented supermarket was complete by the 1950s. Small shops gave way to regional markets like Mayfair, Market Basket and Smith Brothers. Dry goods were now available under the same roof as fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy. These regional supermarkets were eclipsed by chain grocery stores in the decades to follow. Ralph's, Safeway and AlphaBeta were all well-established in the valley.

M.F.K. Fisher, the prolific food critic and writer once observed, "First we eat, then we do everything else." With farms, eateries and groceries galore, the desert was fully prepared to do everything else.



Map of Palmdale, circa 1888, orchard development of the Palm Valley Land Company.