

FOOD&WINE

Learning at the Knee of an American Steakhouse Legend

By **Michael Kaplan** JUNE 12, 2017



Courtesy of the Morton family

Michael and David Morton are the sons of steakhouse royalty. And their newest spot recalls all they learned from their dad.

We all remember unique things about our fathers. They leave behind varied legacies and lasting impacts on their offspring. For some, it persists in the way we toss footballs or grease mitts. For others, it's the style with which we present double porterhouse **steaks**, manage kitchen lines and coddle customers.

Arnie Morton is famous for having launched the Playboy Club, along with Hugh Hefner, in 1960; hipped up the Chicago food scene via the art-deco look of Arnie's in the early '70s and created the chain of Morton's Steakhouses, which grew from a single spot on the Gold Coast to 10 or so locations and eventually got sold for \$12 million in 1989. More importantly, perhaps, he also inspired five of his seven kids to be entrepreneurs in the food and hospitality game. Between them they have opened more than a dozen restaurants, nightclubs and hotels.

The latest example, MB Steak (the initials stand for My Brothers), debuted in Las Vegas's Hard Rock Hotel & Casino last month. The two sons behind it, Michael and David Morton, view their beef-centric spot as a tribute to their showman dad. They remember that he dressed with élan, favored billowing pocket squares, kept potent one-liners on tap and innovated the rolling cart from which Morton's diners were presented with cuts of steak and live lobsters soon to be cooked and plated. Arnie, who passed away in 2005, at 83, would appreciate MB's attention to detail: the cozy downstairs dining room is paneled in gorgeously charred wood; upstairs there's a living wall covered in foliage, a skylight looks over the island bar and motorized windows open to the Sin City night. And at least one dish on the menu would leave Arnie totally jazzed.

“Our pan-roasted diver scallops with morel mushrooms were inspired by Dad,” says Michael. “He loved scallops. Every menu he ever did had scallops on it.”

That said, Michael – who hit Vegas in 1995 and opened happening spots like N9NE steakhouse in Palms, wine-centric La Cave at the Wynn and neon-fronted Mexican eatery La Comida downtown – points out that the nods to his father go beyond culinary offerings. They extend to the vibe, the owner’s sense of handshaking presence, even the kitchen. Art Miner, 85 years old and going strong, designed the MB kitchen and all of the cooking spaces for Arnie. “I will tell you that everything I have done in my professional career is in some way a tribute to our dad,” Michael says. “He was our ultimate idol.”

For starters, he gave Michael entrée into the food biz: “At various restaurants of Dad’s, I swept floors, did linen orders, worked every station. I cut whole lobsters in half, pulled out the stomachs, poured in cream, gave them splashes of butter and threw them in the oven.” More broadly, Arnie also showed his kids what it looks like to be a restaurateur.

“When we went to my dad’s restaurants for dinner, two things happened,” says David, who spent nearly a decade as a trader on Chicago’s Mercantile Exchange and currently owns DMK Restaurants. “We always sat facing the door and he always jumped up half the time because god forbid a guest was unattended. Inevitably, in the middle of the meal, dad had a comment for the chef. They’d banter about a little thing to tweak. And he loved answering the phone himself. If it rang more than twice he leaped to answer it. He was maniacal about that.”

For all of his devotion to the restaurants, though, Arnie ate dinner at home most weeknights and meals were not exactly multi-starred experiences – they were typical of family suppers in the 1970s. “We were in the restaurant business but you would never know it from looking at how we ate at home,” says Michael. “Our mom made salad, potatoes and meat at every meal. But it was really traditional: brisket, meatloaf, roasted chicken. Dad loved cooking omelets for Saturday morning breakfast and spent every Saturday night at the restaurants.”

While Arnie’s local fame could sometimes be a bit much — Michael says constantly being introduced as “Arnie’s son” rather than as “Michael” ultimately led to a bit of rebelliousness — life as a Morton kid came with perks. Michael remembers being a nine-year-old with carte blanche at the Playboy Club. “I chased the bunnies, but not for the reason you’d think,” he says. “I wanted the cool pen lights that they all carried.”

David recalls the unlikely place the family went for special occasion meals: “Benihana. It was for the show and the food. Benihana was new back then and we didn’t go to our own restaurants on birthdays and the like. Us kids loved the place and Dad was super cool with it.”

If he tolerated Benihana, he’d fall in love with MB. The kinds of songs that you think you should know play at sweet-spot volume, subtly nudging louder as the night goes on. Bowls of **mac-and-cheese studded with lobster** seem to adorn every table. A bearded sommelier bounces around while enthusing about the still growing 150-bottle wine-list (the goal is get it up to 400).

On a recent night there, our table groans with a melt-in-your-mouth tomahawk steak, perfectly crusted lamb chops, a hunk of veal done just right and sides that elevate **steakhouse** classics: grits with fresh truffles, creamed spinach topped by a poached egg, silky corn with king crab and poblano chilies.

Considering it all, as Father's Day looms, David Morton says, "It's the ultimate hats-off to Dad, us opening a restaurant together."

Riffing off of his brother, and maybe trying to outdo him a bit, Michael adds, "This would have spoken to my dad so much. If he was here, he'd walk upstairs and tell us that it reminds him of Arnie's. That was his favorite place in the world and, for us, it would be the ultimate compliment."