

Downtown Memphis is undergoing a stunning renaissance, but the beauty of the transformation isn't found in gleaming new buildings and revamped facades. It's what lies beneath the surface that makes Downtown truly shine.

Memphis's splendor is its rich history—its layers and its anecdotes. And as one Memphis couple has worked to add the latest jewel to Downtown's redevelopment crown, they've taken great pride in carefully peeling back those layers, resurrecting the old while creating something brand-new.

The Majestic Grille is Patrick and Deni Reilly's labor of love. Located in the storied space of the Majestic No. 1, a former Downtown theater, the 1940s-style bar and grill not only brings a unique new dining option to Downtown's burgeoning restaurant scene, it also revives an important piece of Memphis history.

"We love this building and wanted to showcase its original design elements and architectural features," says Deni of the 93-year-old structure. Original details such as pilasters, decorative ceiling tiles, and rounded corners—once masked by dull-colored paint and architectural changes made in previous renovations—provide some punch in the newly revived space. Elegant touches such as an elaborate entry vestibule featuring midnight blue velvet drapery serve as a reminder of the building's theatrical history. And a rich history it has.

Built in 1913, the Majestic No. 1 was located across from Memphis's historic Loew's Theatre and down Main Street from the Majestic No. 2, which shared a name but no other connection to the theater. The building originally featured shops in its front bays, and the roof above the grand entry was held up by chains. At the door stood wrought iron ornamented marble ticket booths, and above them, an elaborate sculpture mirrored a monument that still tops the structure. The facade featured the theater's name in black and white tiles, and the top windows—now clear—were adorned with stained glass.

The building housed the theater for about two decades, then became home to Julius Lewis Men's Store when the shop moved from its original Beale Street location in 1933. While a men's store, the place provided early employment for such illustrious Memphians as Downtown developer Henry Turley, who served at age 14 as a sales clerk for big and tall men's suits.

When the building was converted in more recent times into a Downtown dining spot—first Breckenridge Brewery, then Gordon Biersch—the balconies originally designed as seating for theater-goers served the same purpose for diners. The kitchen was built on the site of the original stage.

"They used the basement to house props," says Patrick. "You can see the openings in the floor that



The Majestic Grille at 145 S. Main occupies the former Majestic No. 1 theater building, built in 1913.

Majestically Memphis

story & photos by Stacey Wiedower





Although the Majestic's facade is basically staying as-is, the interior of the restaurant went through a good deal of renovation while maintaining many of the former theater's historical elements.

were used to move the theater's props and sets from storage to stage."

The 10,000-square-foot space offers seating for around 220 diners. The restaurant is divided into sections, each with a distinct feel that caters to a unique portion of the eatery's target clientele. The Reillys preserved some elements of the building's former layout, including the location of the bar on one side of the long, narrow space and a row of intimate booth-style seating along the opposite wall.

The interior, however, has been fully redesigned and restyled to suit the Reillys' dining concept. "There are certainly some art deco elements to it," says Patrick. "We're trying to be true to the original style of the theater."

The kitchen design includes an open chef's bar in the back so diners can watch the culinary action. The micro-brewery that characterized the interior of the building's two previous tenants remains, although most of its mechanisms—once on display in the space through picture windows—have been covered over. Nonetheless, the brewery equipment might play a part in the restaurant down the road.

"When the space became available, we moved on it quickly," Patrick says.

"Deni and I are both big Downtown fans, and we've kept our eyes open for the right spot to open our own restaurant. This is a unique space, and I knew it would work well for the concept we had in mind. I certainly wouldn't do a project this big anywhere else. It was such a great opportunity and a great piece of property."

The concept he created demonstrates every inch of talent Patrick has honed in his 20 years of culinary experience in cities ranging from London to New York to Boston to Orlando—and most recently as director of operations at Swig Martini Bar Downtown. Assisting Patrick is Executive Chef William Lawson, whose resume includes work with Wally Joe's and the Plaza Club. Deni, a certified meeting and event planner, handles special events and private bookings at the restaurant.

"The style of the restaurant is one not served Downtown," Patrick says. "It offers simply prepared food with ample portions, reasonable prices, and impeccable service—all within an upscale ambiance."

The restaurant's fare includes steak and other premium meats, fresh seafood, original flatbread creations, and gourmet

burgers. It offers an extensive and rotating list of wines by the glass, along with a selection of "nice beers"—a testament to Patrick's Irish heritage.

"It's a place you can come on a Tuesday night for a bowl of pasta and a glass of wine or on a Saturday night for a more festive evening out," says Patrick. "In terms of price, we've designed it to be at a mid-range price point so that it's a place you can feel comfortable coming back to often and bringing your entire family."

The Reillys have taken care to cater to another segment of the Downtown population: the local business community. The restaurant offers a variety of amenities, including banquet space, wireless Internet access, and the Innovators Room, a meeting/banquet facility that seats up to 50 people. The room is dedicated to Memphis innovators and features photos of significant Memphis projects, as well as historic photos of Downtown.

"The entire restaurant offers wireless connectivity, and this room is completely turnkey for meeting space," Deni says. "There is a projector system so you can come in here, plug in your computer, and conduct a meeting, all within the setting of a unique Downtown space and with restaurant-quality catering options. Facilities like this are limited in our city, so we are really excited to be able to offer this to the local business community."

Returning the building to its dramatic roots in more ways than one, the Reillys also cater to the theater crowd. The pair has worked closely with The Orpheum to offer a pre-theater menu, with plans to advertise jointly and offer package deals. It's all part of the pair's dream to create a venue that truly caters to Downtown's unique and varied needs.

"We're excited to be a part of Downtown," Patrick says. "We wouldn't have opened a restaurant anywhere else in Memphis."

The Majestic Grille, 145 S. Main, 522-8555, majesticgrille.com. Hours: Mon–Thu 11am–11pm, Fri–Sat 11am–midnight, Sun 11am–8pm. 📍