



My Drift

Title: Wally Ho's Garage & Grill

Compiled by: Jerry D. Petersen

Date: 5 Feb 2021

Article Number: 354-2021-3

More bad news from the 2020 Coronavirus Pandemic. Wally Ho's Grill closed for good at 1PM on 31 December 2020. The Auto Repair Shop will close in June 2021.

I have a personal connection to this family and business. My son Mike is married to Wally and Louise Ho's granddaughter Tiffany Maze. I have helped Colleen Ho with their computers and website for over 20 years. With the help of my friend and former coworker Rick Firchau, we installed the business computers and required software over the years. I setup and programmed the garage database and invoice printing system. I also worked with Colleen to design and maintain the Wally Ho's Garage & Grill website.



Wally's Auto Repair Garage & Grill

I found out that they were closing when Colleen sent me the following message in late December 2020:

Hi Jerry!

You might have already heard but our grill will be shutting down at the end of this month. Therefore, I won't be renewing my yahoo website subscription.

The repair shop will be closing in June 2021. We had already planned to retire then prior to this whole COVID-19 thing.

There are various reasons why we are shutting down the grill earlier - new plastic ban that was supposed to begin 1/2021, more federal workers are working from home so not coming out to eat as much, year-end for our bookkeeping, etc.

But thank you so much for all your help with our computers all these years. Really appreciate it.

Happy Holidays!!

Colleen

For this article, I'm compiling information I could find on the Internet about Wally Ho's Garage & Grill. There were three newspaper articles where I got most of the family and business information:

- ❖ A 2002 Star-Bulletin article where Wally Ho and Willette Ho were interviewed. Title: At Wally's Garage, everyone is Family
- ❖ A 2013 Midweek Newspaper article written by Mufi Hannemann – Former Honolulu mayor. Title: Gung Ho for Garage, Restaurant
- ❖ A Dec 31, 2020 Star-Advertiser article where Colleen Ho and Donna Wasilewski were interviewed. Title: Wally's grill in Aiea goes out with old year



**Louise (left) and Wally Ho (right)
(Receiving Japanese Community Service Award from Midweek Sheryl Lopes)**

Some Background Information

Wally Ho started working as a meat cutter in the 1950s at Willy's Market, owned by his father William (Willy) Ho on land the family owns across from McGrew Point naval reservation on Kamehameha Highway in Aiea. Willy's Restaurant was built in 1955 to serve Chinese and American food. William Ho was following in the footsteps of his own father, Ho Yee, a second-generation immigrant from China who ran a market in the Pearl City peninsula in the 1930s. The Ho family still owns these properties and is currently leasing the market space to the retailers Runner's Hi and Go Bananas and the restaurant space to Dixie Grill.



Go Bananas and Runners Hi



Dixie Grill

In 1956, Wally and Louise Ho took over a small Standard Oil gas station that was located next to Willy's Market and it's been a family operation ever since.



Wally Ho's Gas Station in 1960

Wally and Louise expanded the gas station by making it a two-story building in 1960, adding an auto repair shop and living space upstairs for them and their six children. Wally and Louise ran the business along with their children and several of their 10 grandchildren.

At Wally's Garage, Everyone is Family (2002 Article by Tim Ruel)

After more than 40 years of operation, the family closed their Chevron gas station in 1996. Wally said that being a gas dealer was not as profitable as it used to be, and many dealers across the state have closed shop in recent years. The idea to open a restaurant came from their youngest daughter Willette who had a passion to go into the food business, even though she had no formal training in cooking. Wally liked the idea so after they stopped pumping gas, the service station was converted into an auto repair shop and restaurant.



The Ho family gathered in front of Wally's Auto Repair Shop and Grill 18+ years ago, in 2002. Wally Ho (who died in 2014 at age 82) holds a plate of food from the grill. The rest of the crew, from left to right: daughter Colleen Ho, son Nathan Ho (who died in 2016), daughters Maydene Ching and Willette Ho (who died in 2008), son Timmy Ho, granddaughter Tracie Maze, daughter Sheldene Maze and granddaughter Tiffany Maze-Petersen.

At Wally Ho's Garage & Grill, everyone is family, even the head mechanic. Sung Ahn isn't really related to the Ho family, but he has worked as shop manager at Wally's Auto Repair for the past 25 years. He jokes around with family members on a weekday afternoon, noting Wally's is one of the few shops where you can get your car fixed while you are eating great food. They may have come in for an oil or tire change, but few customers could resist following their noses to the restaurant side to address a sudden urge for sizzling cheeseburgers or a couple of slices of banana bread just out of the oven.

The family started small, serving sandwiches and soups to customers of the auto repair shop. It was trial-and-error at first, Willette said, but the food became a hit, word started spreading and customers kept coming back, so the family installed a full kitchen.

Willette said the aim was to serve healthy food, on a higher level than the average plate lunch drive-in. While the restaurant serves the usual local staples -- beef stew, teriyaki chicken and spam musubi -- the menu also includes rack of lamb, prime rib and lasagna made from scratch, depending on what fresh ingredients are available at the market, Willette said. "We don't just do your ordinary stuff," she said.

The restaurant always used healthy olive oil to cook the fish, which draws a lot of business from workers at Kaiser's Moanalua Medical Center as well as Kapiolani Medical Center at Pali Momi, Wally Ho said.

The biggest part of the Ho's food business was catering and lunch, although the restaurant was also open at 6 a.m. for breakfast during the week. Pictured below are just some of the ono food served at Wally Ho's Grill.

"Grind Like Royalty"



Wally Ho's Catering

Breakfast



Spam and Eggs



Loco Moco



Omelet and Rice

Lunch



Hamburger Steak



Roast Pork Plate



Pastrami on Rye



Korean Garlic Chicken



Cheeseburger and Fries



Lynn's Awesome Meat

Dessert



Everybody's Favorite – Banana Bread

All six of Wally's children pitched in to help the business, wherever help is needed. "Everyone has their own thing," Willette said, adding, "You cannot give yourself a job title." Daughter Colleen handles accounting and property management. Son Timmy works in the repair shop. Son-in-law Tommy Maze, married to oldest daughter Sheldene, handles maintenance, while their daughters Donna, Traci and Tiffany helped in the restaurant.

Everyone has a role, Wally said, pulling out a picture of the late Father Kenneth A. Bray, legendary founder of athletics at his alma mater Iolani School. A caption reads: "You are not individuals greedy for individual honor but members of a team eager for team achievement."



Father Kenneth A. Bray

Gung Ho for Garage, Restaurant (2013 by Mufi Hannemann)



Family staff - (from left) Sung Ahn, Colleen Ho, Timmy Ho, Louise Ho, Wally Ho, Sheldene Maze, Maydene Ching and Nathan Ho

Wally Ho's Garage & Grill is an ideal one-stop shop where you can rehaul your car and at the same time feast on "loco moco." So, if you're looking to jump-start your day, take a drive to the Aiea eatery on Kamehameha Highway and experience for yourself what the mouth-watery hype is all about.

Originally a landmark gas station in 1956, Wally Ho's has found a unique way for the business to survive and thrive. On one side of his establishment, his son Timmy oversees the garage and is in charge of safety check inspections. On the other side, daughters Sheldene Maze and Maydene Ching are frying up Korean Garlic Chicken in the kitchen and mastering other delectable "fluids" to quench your thirst.

Today, their patrons enjoy "broke da mouth" international cuisine specials that include Okinawan Shoyu Pork, Kalua Pig on Bun with Hoi Sin Sauce, Fried Poke and Mochiko Chicken.

Wally and wife Louise stopped pumping gas in 1996 and overhauled the landmark into the business it is today. "We stopped selling gas because it would have been too costly to repair and replace our tank. The new environmental law had tougher requirements," said Wally. Daughter Colleen adds, "Family members had to look for employment elsewhere, so my late sister Willette came up with the restaurant idea due to her passion for the food business. Mixing an auto repair shop and a grill was a way to keep the family together and our new business afloat," explains Colleen, who does the bookkeeping. As the family said goodbye to pumping gas, they found another use for gas to grill the juiciest flame-broiled burgers and create famous dishes and desserts such as Eggplant on a Homemade Taro Bun, Lilikoi/Lemon Bars and Banana Bread.

Wally's longtime employee Sung Ahn also pitches in as an auto technician. He is part of the ohana as he happens to be Colleen's boyfriend. But it is Wally's wife Louise who is the heart of the family and the glue that holds them together to keep garage and grill running. Though she and Wally are now retired, he remains the "commander in chief" of the entire operation. "We still do exactly what he wants us to do," Colleen says. As the popular sitcom of yesteryear reminds us, "Father Knows Best." Wally has nearly 65 years of business experience. "I was originally a meat cutter for my dad at Willy's Market in the 1950s, and I learned from him that a family that works together stays together. My kids are all bosses of their own sections, so they cannot get into trouble or be fired," jokes Wally.

He says his kids are happy and still gung "Ho" about each other. Their formula for success and happiness is a combination of ohana loyalty, strong work ethic and exceptional customer service. "The main thing is we laugh and work together, pay our bills and pay ourselves. It's not about survival, it's about keeping each other close and satisfying our customers," said Colleen.

The Ho's "one team" approach is adopted from one of Wally's heroes in life, Iolani's legendary football coach Father Bray, for whom Wally played for in high school. Wally teaches his family not to be "individuals greedy for individual honors but members of a team eager for team achievement."

The repair shop is rated one of the best on Oahu and the grill side is fast becoming a popular eatery specializing in catering, hearty plate lunches, contemporary vegetarian dishes and a family-friendly place, second to none. Your car gets a tune up and you can personally fuel up on some ono grinds while you wait. Wally believes our vehicles are major investments that need routine maintenance, but our bodies also need to be constantly fueled to keep our engines and hearts running so as not to drive on an empty stomach.



Wally Ho points to where you can find some ono grinds — while your car is repaired

"You can't buy happiness and health with lots of money, but having a wonderful family makes you feel wealthy," said Wally.

Simple food for thought and a recipe for success that we all should emulate!

Mufi Hannemann showed up at Wally Ho's Grill on their last day and posted the following on Facebook:

Post by Mufi H. on 1 Jan 2021

The passing of an era came to a close yesterday with Wally Ho's Grill in Aiea ceasing to operate. Although the auto repair garage will still operate till June, no more chance for their Korean garlic chicken, tasty sandwiches, banana, or carrot bread, or just stopping by to talk story with Wally the "Smiler", his wife Louise, or a member of the Ho clan. When Wally, who bled red, black, and white, was alive (Go Raiders), he and Louise would throw the best and most memorable functions. Best wishes to the entire family and mahalo for their decades of aloha, service, friendship, and hospitality- as the saying goes, they'll be often imitated but never duplicated.

Pictured below from yesterday are members of the Ho clan with yours truly on their last day of business. From left Donna, Colleen, and Sheldene.



Wally's grill in Aiea goes out with old year

(December 29, 2020 by Pat Gee)

Alas, after more than 60 years, the end is approaching for the Aiea institution. The grill closes for good at 1 p.m. on December 31, 2020 and the garage will shut its doors in June 2021, to the dismay of customers who've become like family, Colleen said.

It's grown difficult to carry on since the deaths of three family members: sister Willette Ho (2008), whose idea it was to start the restaurant; father Wally (2014); then brother Nathan (2016). "It's been stressful after their deaths," Colleen said. "I'm ready to retire; it's been hard without them."

Sharon Dodge, a regular patron of the auto repair and food services at Wally's for nine years, came by last week to pick up a final loaf of Wally's popular banana bread. "I've never known a family to work so hard and that deserves to retire at last," Dodge said. "I knew Wally when he was alive, it was such a joy to get to know him. He was so full of life, and I see that in his children. He used to tell me that you can have all the money in the world, but if you don't have the love of a good family, you have nothing — it's such a legacy."

Colleen said they intended to close the business when she and boyfriend Sung Ahn, the mechanic who has been with them for 43 years, retires in June. But with the major drop in the grill's business due to COVID-19, they decided to close the restaurant six months earlier.

Her mother, Louise, in good health at 87, is retired, as are Colleen's sisters Maydene Ching and Sheldene Maze, who both worked in the restaurant, and brother Timmy, a former mechanic. Sheldene, the eldest sibling at 70, was working at the grill until the pandemic hit and catering orders dropped. In August, our hours were cut to just 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. weekdays.

At its busiest, the garage employed four mechanics, but is down to just Ahn now; the kitchen had five workers, but now only has two. Employees have included Wally's grandchildren and a few nonrelatives.

Colleen said it was her late sister Willette's idea to open the restaurant. When the family stopped selling gas in 1996, Willette thought a restaurant would be a good way to keep the family working together. "She was a real hustler, and the creative one. She liked to do different dishes and tried to do new things."

The interior of the building was renovated to install a kitchen and dining room where the gas station used to be, though the two car lanes for the gas pumps remain outside.

Sheldene's daughter Donna Wasilewski runs the grill, with help from Katrina Corpuz, who's been there four years. Sheldene, whose two other daughters also used to help in the kitchen, nods solemnly when talking about missing the close-knit experience of everyone pulling together.



Memorabilia collected over the decades covers walls and windows inside Wally Ho's grill, surrounding Colleen Ho as she prepares an order of banana bread for pickup.



Donna Wasilewski pours gravy onto a plate of hamburger steak at Wally Ho's Grill in Aiea. Wasilewski is the granddaughter of Wally and wife Louise Ho.

Wasilewski relishes the memory of the rack of lamb and braised short ribs her Aunt Willette created. They're still her favorite dishes, though no longer on the menu. After Willette died, the family tried to re-create her dishes without her recipes. "Between all of us we tried to get the recipes together — except for the rack of lamb," Wasilewski added. "She was the only one who could do it."

Today's menu isn't as diverse as when they offered kalua pig sandwiches with hoisin sauce and fried poke, but Wasilewski's proud of the top-selling Korean garlic chicken, and the made-from-scratch hamburger steak and loco moco with deep brown gravy.

"This time of the year, we would have been very busy with catering," Wasilewski said. At least the banana bread loaves are still flying out the door, each made with over a pound of bananas. "People say it's the best they ever had."

The carrot cake is a winner, too. Wasilewski's passion is baking and cake decorating, with trial-and-error her main teacher, she said. Now in her 50s, Wasilewski said she's been around the family business since she was 6, learning to pump gas, change oil and fill tires when she got older, as did all her sisters and cousins. As an adult she's worked there off and on for about 25 years, learning the most about how a business should be run from her grandparents.

“My grandfather was in charge of everything. He was here every day even when he retired, him and Grandma, checking on things and greeting customers. His nickname was ‘Smiler,’ because he was very friendly. He loved dealing with customers,” she said.



Colleen Ho, Donna Wasilewski and Sheldene Maze

Since an Instagram post a few weeks ago first mentioned the closing of Wally Ho's, even customers from long ago have been swarming in for a last hamburger steak or other favorites. Colleen said her mother is not sure what will be done with the property.

“We'll miss it and the customers — they're pretty disappointed. That's what is so hard,” she said. “Some are saying they'll have to buy a new car now that they can no longer come for repairs. We really appreciate their business all these years. They've become like family.

In Conclusion, I think Wally Ho sums things up very well with this statement:

“You can have all the money in the world, but if you don't have the love of a good family, you have nothing.”

Bigdrifter44@gmail.com

Bigdrifter.com