

TENDER MEMORIES



AT JUNIOR'S GRILL, OWNER TOMMY KLEMIS TREATED EVERYONE IN THE TECH COMMUNITY LIKE FAMILY.

KRISTIN BAIRD RATTINI



Tommy Klemis took over the family business, Junior's Grill, in 1975. Klemis' legacy at Tech continues today through Klemis Kitchen, named in his honor.

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WHEN YOU HEAR the name Junior's Grill, what do you think of?

Your answer likely depends on which decade you were on campus and patronized this beloved mainstay of the Tech community, which closed its doors and turned off its blue neon sign in 2011.

Maybe it's a slice of Edwards pie and a milkshake. Or the oversized slices of French toast, dusted with cinnamon. Perhaps it's the warm chocolate chip cookies, sold three for \$1. Or the first time you ate Junior's chicken tenders, a veritable Tech rite of passage.

Whatever your particular culinary craving (we know your mouth is watering right now), everyone remembers the man behind them: Tommy Klemis, Junior's genial and generous owner who helmed his family's restaurant for 36 years and made



sure all customers felt welcome and left well-fed.

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

Junior's Grill was named for its original owner, Wilbur Gold Jr., who opened the restaurant at the corner of Techwood Drive and North Avenue in 1948. When Jimmy Klemis and John Chaknis—Tommy's father and uncle—took it over in 1958, the year Tommy turned 10, they didn't intend for him to follow in their footsteps.

"My dad told me, 'I work like this so you don't have to go into the restaurant business, so that you can go to Georgia Tech,'" Klemis recalls. When his father passed away suddenly in 1964, his mother, Lula, insisted that Klemis still pursue his own path. She took over as co-owner of Junior's with Chaknis, a member of the Atlanta Symphony who occasionally serenaded diners on his violin.

After serving in the Marines, Klemis

was accepted into the electrical engineering program at Georgia Tech in 1970. "But life came just a little bit faster than we had planned," he says. He and his wife had an infant son, Jimmy, at home and another child—his daughter, Leigh Anne—on the way; money was tight. He left Tech after one year to work as an engineering associate at Western Electric.

In 1975, Chaknis suffered a heart attack. Lula Klemis couldn't run Junior's alone; she considered selling the restaurant. "My family encouraged me to try to save the business," Klemis says. He left his job and joined Junior's full time as co-owner with his mom. "God had a plan," he says. "He brought me back on campus, but this time to serve Georgia Tech students instead of be one."

TAKING CARE OF "THEIR STUDENTS"

Among those students was Larry Curtin, AP 87, who patronized three incarnations of Junior's Grill over his 15 years on campus as a student and



as a staff member. Curtin lived in Techwood Dorm, which stood next to Junior's second location. Squeezed into a former barbershop on Techwood Drive, the 28-stool diner served an average of 800 patrons a day. "Junior's was our dining hall," Curtin recalls. He still has a few coupons left in a Junior's meal book, which provided \$22 of Junior's value-priced meals for \$20, a deal that kept many cash-strapped students fed over the years.



To speed up the line, students often used shorthand, a "Junior's jargon," to order. "French strip, hold the dust"

1. / Junior's prided itself on offering students affordable food on campus. A coupon book provided \$22 worth of food for \$20.
2. / Students shown eating inside Junior's, from a 1975 *Blue Print*.
3. / In order to get through the line fast, students learned "Junior's jargon," or a shorthand form for ordering meals quickly.



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meant French toast with a strip of bacon, no cinnamon. "Top two, 10, cheese and choke it" meant the top two vegetables from the daily list of eight options and a 10-ounce hamburger steak with sautéed onions and cheese on top. "Honey-mooner" for lettuce alone. The most popular call was "dress two cheese side": two cheeseburgers with everything and an order of French fries.



In 1987, Junior's expanded into the adjacent space vacated by the Engineer's Bookstore. It was there—in the larger Junior's 3.0—that Klemis hosted an unforgettable event for Curtin and his friends: a candlelight dinner for the 12 "Gentlemen of Techwood" and their dates after the dorm formal. Klemis brought porcelain plates from home and dressed in a tuxedo to serve ribeye steaks and baked potatoes to the appreciative guests. "I was overwhelmed," Curtin says. "Outside of my family, there had never been an adult in my life who went above and beyond to do something so special for me."

Klemis, his mother, and his aunt Anne Pamfilis—affectionately known to all customers as "Miss Anne"—constantly looked after "their students" and cared about what was happening

in their lives. "Sometimes when the ladies worked the register, you had to remind them, 'Hey, quit talking so much! There's a line!'" Klemis says with a laugh. If a customer looked glum after an exam, Miss Anne might slip them some chocolate chip cookies. If a student couldn't pay, they ate anyway, their meal extended on credit.

Klemis' generosity was not forgotten when Junior's Grill was torn down in October 1993 to make way for dorms for the 1996 Summer Olympics. Alumni and supporters rallied for the restaurant's revival. In February 1994, Georgia Tech handed Klemis the key to the new Junior's Grill: a 4,000-square-foot restaurant in the

Bradley Building under Tech Tower, "in the best neighborhood ever," Klemis says.

BJOC (BIG JUNIOR'S ON CAMPUS)

In its new location, Junior's Grill became even more entwined in Tech life. "When we came on campus, I said, 'We're going to focus on the traditions of Tech,'" Klemis recalls. He launched an annual trivia night to kick off Homecoming Week. "I learned more about Georgia Tech during those nights than I could ever learn in a book," he says.

Billie Pendleton-Parker, "BPP," encouraged Klemis to sponsor a student photo contest, with the winning snaps displayed in Junior's. "There was no one who loved the students more than she did," he says of BPP, who received a Junior's chicken tender basket at her retirement party. She passed away in January 2021, the same year she was named an Honorary Alumna by the Alumni Association. "She said, 'Let's see the campus through their eyes.' The photos truly captured the beauty of our campus."

The photos hung alongside other Tech mementos, including a piece of



In 1994, Junior's was relocated to the Bradley Building, where it stayed until it was closed in 2011.



◀ (Top) Tommy (center) with his aunt, Anne Pamfili (left), and his mother, Lula (right), during the early days at Junior's, and (bottom) at Junior's farewell in 2011.



the goalpost from the 1990 National Championship game. The décor, however, was never what drew customers to Junior's; it was the food and Klemis and the company.

There were the Theta Xi fraternity brothers, who claimed Junior's high-top table as their own every Friday for group lunches. Laura Giglio, EE 10, MS ECE 11, remembers her frequent breakfast meetings over French toast with her mentor, Mahera "Mimi" Philobos, MS AE 83, architect of Tech's Women in Engineering program. Giglio got to know Klemis well when she returned to Tech to work for the Alumni Association and floated the idea—still on hold—of a Junior's cookbook to benefit the Students' Temporary Assistance and Resources (STAR)'s Klemis Kitchen. (See sidebar.) "Tommy was like a grandpa," she says. "He was everybody's grandpa."

Web Development Manager Scott Riggle and his wife, Associate Dean of Students Colleen Riggle, were among the countless couples to have their first date at Junior's. "We went there many

times after that for lunch and breakfast, and in later years they'd always ask about our daughter," he says. "They remembered everybody."


The student rap duo The GTGs even memorialized Klemis and Junior's in two songs: "Junior's Grill Jam" and "Y Tommy Dice," on which Klemis himself rapped under the name "Tommy K." The tunes, available online, name-check the restaurant's all-star cast of employees, including Miss Anne and Walter Gilbert, the resident poet on staff. They share the history of Junior's. And they pay heartfelt tribute to Klemis.

"Tommy was one of the most encouraging people I encountered at Tech," says Brandon "Swaff" Swafford, ID 07, one half of the GTGs. "His love poured out to anyone he served."

When Klemis realized in April 2011 it was time to hang up his apron, he tried to close up shop quietly. But

word got out. On April 21, supporters streamed in from around town and out of town, lining up as they had at the 28-seat diner on Techwood Drive for one last chance to talk with Klemis, Gilbert, and "Miss Anne."

The turnout left Klemis speechless. "I still think about, 'How did our little family business end up on this amazing campus?'" he says. "I thank God all the time for all those years of being involved with the students."

His decade in retirement has been largely focused on his family—including Miss Anne, now 92. He and his wife, Lis, spend a lot of time visiting their nine grandchildren in Tennessee. While he doesn't cook much these days, he's always happy to indulge when the grandkids want to play Junior's. "I'll call out, 'Order In!'" he says, "and they'll respond, 'Cook me a French toast!'" 

NO ONE GOES AWAY HUNGRY: THE KLEMIS KITCHEN



TOMMY KLEMIS never let a student go away hungry from Junior's Grill. In tribute, in February 2015, Georgia Tech's Students' Temporary Assistance and Resources (STAR) opened the Klemis Kitchen, a 24/7 on-campus food pantry for students facing food insecurity. "The honor moved me to tears," Klemis says.

In the Fall 2021 semester, over 100 students have requested access to Klemis Kitchen for at least a few meals each

week. The student-led organization Campus Kitchen collects leftovers from the dining halls and packages them into individual meals for the pantry. There's also a supply of shelf-stable foods collected through food drives.

"It has been exciting and inspiring to see how folks have rallied around the Klemis Kitchen and want to participate in removing that stressor of food insecurity for their fellow students," says Steve Fazanbaker, direc-

tor of STAR.

"I was thrilled to find out about Klemis Kitchen, since the strain of collegiate life has left me food insecure for many years now," says Nadia Qutob, a fourth-year physics major. "Klemis Kitchen gave me the food I needed to keep my health up and the stability I needed to get me through a difficult semester."

Donations can be made at mygeorgia.tech.gatech.edu/giving/starprogram.

SECRET REVEALED: JUNIOR'S FRENCH TOAST RECIPE

► **HOMECOMING WEEKEND** is a chance to reconnect with the people and places at Georgia Tech that hold special memories. This year, alumni who returned relived a delicious mainstay from the past through the re-creation of Junior's Grill at Buzz Bash. Long-time Junior's owner Tommy Klemis shared a special message via video for

alumni and even revealed the secret to his former restaurant's famous French toast recipe—*psst*, it's pancake mix!

After reading "Tender Memories" in the Winter 2022 Food & Beverage issue, Will Turner, Mgt 14, asked the *Alumni Magazine* to pass along a recipe request to Tommy Klemis.



HELLO,
I AM A PROUD ALUM OF TECH FROM THE CLASS OF 2014. I VERY MUCH ENJOYED THE ARTICLE ABOUT JUNIOR'S GRILL. I MISS IT AND WISH I COULD STILL GO DOWN THERE. I WAS IN MY THIRD SEMESTER WHEN THE RESTAURANT SADLY CLOSED. MY ONE REGRET IS THAT MY SON, WHO IS 5 MONTHS OLD, WILL NEVER GET TO EAT AT JUNIOR'S IF HE CAN GET INTO TECH. SINCE THE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION SEEMS TO STILL BE IN CONTACT WITH TOMMY, CAN YOU GET THE FRENCH TOAST RECIPE FROM HIM?
THANKS!
WILL TURNER, MGT 14

TOMMY'S RESPONSE

► It's been almost 11 years since we served our last batch and nothing was ever written down. But let me encourage him and those alumni willing to use a little "trial and error" approach...it's very basic!

Many high-end restaurants start by mixing eggs, milk, and a little vanilla

extract to dip their French bread...very good! But we needed to feed hungry students fast at a price they could afford, so we took it to another level. We found that using "complete pancake mix" (add eggs and milk to make a heartier mix...fluffier) does the trick. So dip the Flower's Bakery regular

sandwich bread (day-old holds together better!) into the mix. Now, as to proportions...as I stated earlier, trial and error. Follow directions on any pancake box (complete mix)...Try to keep the batter slightly sticky (a few more eggs if needed), not too thick... definitely not thin. Depending on your small batch, play with it.

You'll get the results needed after a few trials. Now have your oiled griddle at 360°.

Dip your bread in the prepared batter (don't soak it too long, dip to cover both sides of the bread) and place it on the griddle. After 1½ to 2 minutes, check to see if it's golden brown, then turn to the other side and cook for the same time. Again, this is trial and error...you can do it!

Take it off the griddle, add butter, dust with ground cinnamon, pour syrup as needed, and *Voilà!* 🍷

