

Spaghetti Western

Situated on a Wild West movie set, Cudia Restaurant attracted Hollywood stars and foreign dignitaries – but none outshone its host, Italian nobleman Salvatore Cudia.

IF A RESTAURANT IS A reflection of the talents and charisma of its owner, Salvatore P.B. Cudia set a high bar for fine dining in Phoenix for almost two decades. Already an accomplished sculptor, painter, photographer, musician, inventor, voice coach, and movie director, Cudia was also fluent in six languages by the time he entered the Valley's hospitality business in the 1940s. Utilizing his unique

skill set, the flamboyant Renaissance Man created a dazzling dining experience that was labeled by *Good Housekeeping* columnist Dorothy Kilgallen as the most fascinating restaurant in Phoenix, "a place to make an Easterner gape."

Set against the backdrop of Camelback Mountain, Cudia Restaurant was known for its otherworldly ambiance. Visitors entered through two elaborately lit pillars into Cudia

City, a studio for filming Westerns located near the northwest corner of Camelback Road and 40th Street. Walking across the lot past an Old West frontier-town set, guests would find the restaurant, housed in a low-slung building with an elaborate hitching post out front and period antiques scattered around.

"There was a stagecoach parked nearby in which kids would play endlessly," recalls Ernest Linsenmeyer, a Phoenix native who owned Union Seafood in the city from 1955 to 2010, and whose family visited often.

The restaurant's focal point was a spectacular outdoor dining area featuring a colossal 30-foot, manmade waterfall cascading over rocks into a turquoise-colored swimming pool. Tables were set up on the adjoining lawn; a saguaro growing through the patio roof added to the exotic atmosphere.

"There were also two indoor dining rooms and a bar, behind which were two large paintings of reclining ladies," says William Linsenmeyer, Ernest's younger brother and a retired University of Wisconsin history professor. The menu featured affordable gourmet food – including juicy steaks with spaghetti on the side – that were lauded by the noted food critic of the era, Duncan Hines, who wrote an annual nationwide restaurant guide, *Adventures in Good Eating*. Cudia Restaurant's motto was "Come hungry and we'll feed the heck out of you!"

Still, no amount of glowing media praise could outshine Cudia himself, who was descended from Italian royalty and favored wearing a diamond ring that covered three fingers. "Salvatore was gracious, poised, and had a somewhat courtly manner. He was impeccably attired in a western shirt and trousers," William Linsenmeyer says.

Born near Rome in 1887, Cudia inherited the title of marquis – roughly equivalent to an English earl – but had little taste for it, he later told his family. "A marquis?" Cudia once said to his son, according to a 1977 *Arizona Republic* article. "You don't get that title for being good; you get it for being bad on behalf of the king." As a young man, he deeded his considerable property to an orphanage and studied for the priesthood before immigrating to America in 1904 to work as an artist in a multitude of fields. This included forming an Italian opera company in



Salvatore P.B. Cudia

Washington, D.C., serving as concertmaster at New York's Metropolitan Opera, sculpting the busts of Broadway theatrical greats, and building movie sound stages in Florida and Hollywood. At the latter, he made four Polish-language Westerns that became export successes.

Attracted by Phoenix's clear air and cheap land, he moved from Southern California to build his Western movie studio eight miles outside the city in 1939. Only four films were made at Cudia City before World War II halted movie production (see sidebar). During the war, Cudia designed patriotic plaques and charitably allowed his sound stage to be used as a banquet hall for civic groups and servicemen. The on-site restaurant and accommodations, originally used by film crews, evolved during the war into the Cudia City Guest Resort for visitors wanting to experience a touch of Hollywood.

Blessed with dashing good looks and sharp wit, and oozing Continental charm, Cudia attracted a classy clientele, which included Hollywood actors such as Gary Cooper, Tyrone Power, and Ginger Rogers, plus royalty such as the King of Iraq, Faisal II. At times, humbly referring to himself as "da caretaker," Cudia operated the restaurant like the wisecracking host of a variety show. "Cudia insults his customers but always with a gleam in his eye. Everyone knows Cudia, everyone likes Cudia, and everyone thinks his food and hospitality are tops," noted an *Arizona Times* article.

Cudia hosted many of the Valley's social functions in the 1940s and 1950s. Small gatherings were held in his restaurant; major events like the Phoenix Symphony Gala were held in a nearby sound stage that was converted into a dining hall for up to 1,200 guests.

Although a well-known member of the establishment, Cudia did not hesitate to flout the prevalent mores of the day. Until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Phoenix was a segregated city; African-Americans were excluded from most hotels and restaurants. In 1947, prominent Phoenix attorney William P. Mahoney Jr. received a visit from renowned black vocalist Dorothy Maynor, who later founded the Harlem School of the Arts. Mahoney tried to make reservations at several elite Phoenix restaurants, only to be informed they would not serve an African-American.

A friend suggested Mahoney call Cudia, a cantankerous yet progressive character, according to the book *Race Work: The Rise of Civil Rights in the Urban West* by Matthew Whittaker. "Cudia assured Mahoney that 'no Ku Klux Klan son-of-a-bitch is going to tell me who I can or cannot serve. Come on

The Western series *26 Men* was filmed at Cudia City.



Celluloid Sendoff

CUDIA CITY IS REMEMBERED AS MUCH FOR THE HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR it bestowed on the fledgling desert city as the Westerns produced there. Located at the northwest corner of Camelback Road and 40th Street, the replica frontier town was a well-trafficked film and TV production spot from 1939 until it was redeveloped in the 1960s.

Cudia City's cinematic highlight was its last major production: the ABC television show *26 Men*. The 78-episode series starring Tris Coffin ran for three years in the late 1950s and was based on the adventures of the Arizona Rangers who brought bad guys to justice during territorial days. The show proved popular with viewers and, when its cast wandered off the set for lunch one day, created a skewed impression of the Valley for one newcomer. "I remember in 1957 going to the drugstore at 44th Street and Camelback and seeing various cowboys in full costume at the lunch counter," says Milly Bolek, who had just moved from Cleveland. "I thought to myself, 'People sure dress like authentic cowboys out here in Phoenix!'"

Besides fans of the Western genre, *26 Men* has also drawn notice from those seeking views of Camelback Mountain and other natural Valley landmarks before they became gilded with mansions and five-star resorts.

— Douglas Towne

out.' Mahoney and his guest welcomed the spirited gesture and enjoyed a 'delightful dinner featured right in the middle of the dining room.'"

In the early 1960s, Cudia retired at age 74, closing Cudia City and selling the land for redevelopment. None of the studio buildings he designed were preserved. The marquis spent his final decade living in the nearby Cudia City Estates listening to his favorite Italian opera arias until he died in 1971 at age 83, leaving behind a son, granddaughter, and six great-grandchildren.

"Toto, as the family called Salvatore, found his true home in Phoenix," his great-grandson Jim Judge says. A teacher at nearby Phoenix Country Day School, Judge now lives in Cudia's former home with his mother, Carmelita Judge – not a mile from where the family's famous patriarch conjured Hollywood fantasy and culinary excellence. Standing among numerous Cudia keepsakes, Judge reverently adds, "He was able to create a haven here in the Valley not only for himself, but his family."

— Douglas Towne