

DENVER



LASTING LEGACY

Preservationist Dana Crawford Finds Beauty Where Others See Decay

MILKING IT

A Fabulous Food Hall with a New Twist – Here, All the Eateries are Created by Chef Frank Bonanno

THE NAME GAME

How Denver Restaurants Earned Their Monikers

SPOOKY TIMES

Ghostly Stories Behind Some of the State's Haunted Spots

Uncle Family Jones Distillery
Mister Tuna Zoe Ma Ma
Hop Alley
Guard and Grace Work & Class
Super Mega Bien **The Way Back**
Gelato Boy **Beatrice & Woodsley**
Williams & Graham
Bar Helix **How DID** Stoic & Genuine
They Name That
Restaurant?

From family history to fictional characters,
Denver's restaurant names ring true

By **Eric Elkins**

Does the name make the place, or does the place make the name?
Finding the right moniker for a new restaurant or bar can be viewed as a sacred duty, a fun opportunity, or just one more essential step before opening the doors. From the easy (but effective) choice to make it eponymous to the deeper process of creating a brand story, settling on just the right name can have long-term implications.

The name of a restaurant can set it apart early on, but it can also become iconic over time, associated with a beloved chef, a signature dish, a consistent ambiance, or even just a particular clientele.

When chef/owner Tommy Lee opened **Uncle**, the popular ramen shop in the LoHi neighborhood, he wanted an English word that carried a deeper meaning, one tied to his own culture and upbringing.

“In Chinese culture (and many others), we call elders ‘Aunt’ and ‘Uncle,’ even if they’re not related to you — more as a term of respect and endearment,” he says. And it didn’t hurt that the name would also honor people who influenced his cooking, like Peter Chan, owner of Denver’s Peter’s Chinese Cafe, a delicious little spot in Congress Park.

But when it came time to open his second restaurant, **Hop Alley**, a modern Chinese dining experience in RiNo, Lee opted for a nod to the historic.

“Hop Alley was the nickname for the original Chinatown in Downtown Denver in the 1840s,” he says. “It was a somewhat derogatory term, as the ‘hop’ referred to opium, and Chinatown was seen as an area to indulge your vices — gambling, prostitution and drugs.” But Lee and his team decided to co-opt the name into something more positive. “For us, Hop Alley has a similar meaning, in that you’re coming to indulge your senses and have a rowdy time with your friends and family.” The building was home to a soy sauce company in the 1900s, which adds to the historical significance.

Honoring family and heritage was likewise the inspiration for Edwin Zoe, who owns **Zoe Ma Ma**, with its original fast-casual Chinese location in Boulder, and a tasty addition to the Union Station complex in Denver. Zoe’s own mother inspired the recipes for his restaurants.

“When I was a child, my father took me to a little store where an elderly lady made Chinese pickled vegetables (pao tsai),” Zoe says. “To be respectful, my father told me to address her as ‘Zhang Ma Ma.’ [In many Asian cultures, the family name comes first.] Naming the restaurant Zoe Ma Ma was a way for me to honor my own Ma Ma.”

Restaurant empire-builder and chef Troy Guard also looked to honor family when naming several of his restaurants, including two notables, **Mister Tuna** and **Guard and Grace**.

“I grew up half my life in Hawaii,” says Guard. “My dad was born and raised there, and his buddies called him Mister Tuna because he was always in the water like a fish; scuba diving, snorkeling, surfing.” When Guard went to open his RiNo restaurant, he wanted to thank his parents for their lifetime of support. You’ll find a big portrait of his mother and photos of his father on the beach as a kid as décor there.



Hop Alley

“It’s an ode to my family and a thank you,” he says.

For downtown steakhouse Guard and Grace, he looked even closer to home.

“My daughter’s name is Grace,” Guard says. “When we were thinking of the concept for this steakhouse, we wanted the name to be both strong and masculine, but also a little softer and feminine — we didn’t want it to just be a guys’ place.”

With big windows and an open room, as opposed to Denver’s traditionally stuffy, leather and dark wood steakhouses, Guard thought the new name fit the concept, because it was “strong but light.”

Family Jones Distillery honors a different kind of family — not the one you're given, but the one you choose.

"The people involved in bringing this brand to life are a mixed family," says Nick Touch, legendary barman and brand specialist. "All with different backgrounds that bring something special to the table. Our Spirit House on Osage is the same, as restaurants tend to be — a mixed group of people working together to make something beautiful. These are our 'chosen families.'"

As Touch puts it, spirits are also a mixed group of ingredients that create something beautiful.

"Jones" has dual meaning — a common, inclusive last name combined with the idea of "jonesing" for a cocktail and a maybe even a break from your given family.

Super-talented chef/owner Dana Rodriguez honored her own team when naming her newest restaurant, **Super Mega Bien**. It's a consistently delicious Latin-inspired take on dim sum just across the street from **Work & Class**, the first spot she and co-owner Tony Maciag opened in 2014, which was busy pretty much from day one.

Every day when she would greet the team, Dana would ask how everyone was doing. One of the employees, Rene, always answered the same way: "Super mega bien!" No matter what else was going on in his life, that was his answer (and with the occasional four-letter word+ing modifier for extra emphasis).

Rene eventually moved into a construction job, but the phrase stuck with Rodriguez. And when the new place did open, she was able to convince him to return to the team and open the restaurant he'd helped name.

From **Work & Class** to **Williams & Graham**, ampersands play a big role in Denver restaurant names.

Beatrice & Woodsley honors a fictional couple, whose story inspires one of the most gorgeous restaurants in the city.

As owner Kevin Delk tells it, "Beatrice was the life-loving daughter of a French winemaking family who relocated to create a small vineyard in California during the early 1800s. Woodsley was the handsome and crafty son of a lumberjack family turned coopers, supplying the early wine producers. Upon first sight, Beatrice and Woodsley fell in love and quickly married. Stirred by his new bride, Woodsley built a remote cabin amid the woods of the Colorado mountains. Built with skilled and loving hands, he constructed a strong abode complete with the day's amenities and a small root cellar beneath the feet of the aspens. Life was lived with appreciation amongst the forest bird-song and the snow-capped peaks, happily ever after."

The restaurant is built to resemble what that home would look like if you came upon it now, generations later. Aspen trees have grown up through the floor and the woodlands have slowly taken over the little cabin, but the fixtures are still in place. You can feel the complementary personalities of its namesakes — the elegant and the rustic in gorgeous counterpoint (in both the décor and the food). The names are made up, but the emotions are real.



Bar Helix

Speaking of made-up names joined by ampersands, both the national treasure **Williams & Graham** in LoHi and the seafood restaurant **Stoic & Genuine** in Union Station were inspired by casual conversations leading to combinations that just sounded right for their concepts.

Todd Colehour, co-owner of **Williams & Graham**, had been trying to come up with the right name for their project, a bookstore facade with a speakeasy bar behind a hinged shelf, when he happened to grab a bite with a local chef and randomly asked what his middle name was. Paired with Colehour's own grandmother's family name (Williams), "Graham" added just the right touch to sound like an old-fashioned bookstore.

"When the name fits," Colehour says, "it's almost like a different pitch or a different sound, and you just know it's right."

Stoic & Genuine has a similar origin story. Co-owners Jen Jasinski, Beth Gruitch, Jorel Pierce, and Jasinski's husband, chef Max MacKissock (**Bar Dough, Señor Bear, Morin**) were drinking cocktails after a culinary event in NYC when the conversation turned to personalities. Jasinski said her husband Max was Stoic. Pierce wondered how she would describe *him*.

"Genuine," she answered. That's all it took.



Adam Larkey Photography

The simplicity of a catchy moniker is what inspired local legend Kendra Anderson when she named her sexy and lush **Bar Helix** in the RiNo neighborhood. “It’s a nod to my love of wine and my work as a sommelier. *Helix* is the physical shape of a corkscrew.”

Sometimes you come upon a name that seems to arrive magically, but other times, it’s workshopped and brainstormed until you find the one that conveys the spirit and personality of the restaurant.

Award-winning mixologist Chad Michael George says that’s how he and his biz partners settled on **The Way Back** for their fun and inviting Highlands spot.

“We actually gathered friends from all walks of life for a little creative brainstorm session, surrounded by inspiration photos and core values of what we hoped to achieve,” he says. “The Way Back was an immediate front-runner and crowd favorite. It came down to us wanting to get back to the way things used to be done before we found shortcuts in all aspects of food service, which sacrificed nutrition and flavor.”



Devin Stinson



Devin Stinson

The Way Back



Best Bets

Spending so much time talking about origin stories didn't give me a chance to rave about the food and cocktails! Here are fave dishes from featured spots. One disclaimer: Menus change depending on the season and the whims of the chefs. That's a good thing.

Uncle – The spicy chicken ramen is a perpetual favorite

Hop Alley – Four words: bone marrow fried rice – unctuous and delicious

Zoe Ma Ma – Try the duck noodle wonton soup, only available Fridays and Saturdays

Mister Tuna – The ember-blistered mackerel is not to be missed

Guard and Grace – It's all about any of the bone-in, dry-aged steaks

Family Jones Distillery – The Rock & Rye cocktail is autumn in a glass

Work & Class – Go beyond your comfort zone and dig into the tender roasted goat

Super Mega Bien – If a plate of Cuban beef and plantains is on a cart near your table, get it!

Beatrice & Woodsley – Bubble and Squeak is a hearty and playful veggie entree

Williams & Graham – Although they're known for meticulous craft cocktails, you can't go wrong with an order of flank steak poutine

Stoic & Genuine – It's a seafood restaurant, but the cheeseburger is the BEST in Denver

Bar Helix – Indulge with a Bump and Bubbles; a dollop of caviar and champagne to go with it

The Way Back – Order whatever they're doing with chicken that evening

Gelato Boy – The London Fog is pure Earl Grey loveliness



Gelato Boy

And here's a love story for dessert. In 2008, a young Bryce Licht moved to Italy. While there, he walked into a local gelateria and caught a glimpse of the lovely Giulia. From that moment on, he went back to the same gelato shop, day in and day out, hoping to woo her. Licht went so often and ate so much gelato, the locals started calling him "**Gelato Boy.**" And that's the name the couple (now married and living in Denver) went with for their fresh-daily gelato spot in the Zeppelin Station food hall.

Settling on the name of a restaurant is an act of faith — you want it to reflect your brand and concept but be compelling enough to draw in the curious diner. You want to honor the people and influences that brought you there, but still create a sense of place.

At the same time, the name can only take you so far. If the food and ambiance and customer experience aren't stellar, even the most creative concept won't make up for it (Casa Bonita notwithstanding).

Fortunately for us in Denver, we tend to get both — fun, interesting restaurant names that fulfill their promise when you settle in for a meal.

