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Donald Callender was an icon in restaurant business

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Donald W. Callender, 81, a part-time Indian Wells resident who founded the national restaurant chain Marie Callender's, died Wednesday.

As fate would have it, Callender died a day before the \$36 million Jackalope Ranch restaurant he envisioned opened in Indio.

"We love the place, and he can be with us in spirit and see that his baby is doing well," said Indio Councilwoman Guadalupe Ramos Watson.

Callender, also the owner of Babe's Bar-B-Que & Brewhouse in Rancho Mirage, may not even have been aware the restaurant was opening, said Babe's general manager Arthur L. Vasquez.

Vasquez, who worked with Callender for 17 years, said Callender had a "slip-and-fall" at his Corona del Mar home just after Thanksgiving 2007. The fall triggered a series of medical problems that included stroke-like symptoms and a couple of bouts with pneumonia.

"He's been under doctor's care for most of last year," Vasquez said.

'Major inspiration'

Family members described Callender as an "icon" and a "major inspiration" in the restaurant industry in a statement released Thursday.

"He created and developed one of the most successful restaurant chains in America," the statement read. "Over the course of his career, he provided thousands of people job opportunities. His determination and work ethics reached out to touch and inspire thousands of lives around the country."

Callender, who once told Vasquez he loved apple pie so much he called it his "favorite breakfast," got his start in the restaurant business when he was in his early 20s.

His mother, Marie Callender, gained a following selling pies to local bakeries. The family bought a converted military depot in Long Beach in 1948 to make and sell the pies.

Within a few years, the Callenders were making more than 200 pies daily.

In 1964, Don opened the first pie and coffee shop in Orange. Other pie shops followed, and by 1969, the shops began offering full-service restaurant menus.

By 1986, Callender's pie shop and restaurant chain grew to 125 locations nationwide. The venture was sold to Ramada Corp. for \$80 million.

Callender, though, opted to return to the baker's block. After years of tending to stock investments, he took steps to build and open the \$3.5 million Babe's Bar-B-Que at The River in Rancho Mirage in April 2002.

Callender 'cool uncle'

Vasquez described Callender as a "cool uncle."

"You know, the cool uncle or aunt that does things that normal people don't do?" he said.

For Vasquez, that cool uncle thing came early in his career. "It was the summer of 1992. I was just hired, and the next thing I know, I'm walking out to his helicopter for a flight to Disneyland. As we swooped around the Matterhorn, I'm thinking, so this is what the life of a line cook is like."

Lifetime friend Robert "Naki" Nakashima of Orange County said Callender had an incredible business acumen with only a few years of junior college under his belt.

"When we were kids, instead of having one paper route like we all had, he had two," Nakashima said.

The Nakashima family was sent to a Japanese camp in Arkansas when World War II broke out.

"Naki" said Callender made sure he had a job when he returned.

"That's the kind of guy he was," Nakashima said. "This man was unbelievable."

Funeral arrangements are pending.

Callender is survived by his wife of 31 years, Katy Callender; sons Lucky Callender and Glen Callender; daughter Cathe Sprunk; and his grandchildren.

Staff writer Aldrich Tan contributed to this report.
