

the '50s and '60s, but Chuck-A-Burger kept the trend going through the '70s and made it official by creating monthly Cruise Nights in 1982. Cruisin' may have gone the way of the tail fin and the duck's-ass haircut, but carhops, vintage hot rods, '50s-tribute bands and rose-colored nostalgia have kept Chuck-A-Burger's Cruise Nights hoppin' for the last 25 years.

Until now, that is. What should be a golden anniversary for the fabled burger shack has become a swan song. It seems the Stille family has leased the site for all these years, and now the owner has decided to offer it for sale to major developers. There is no joy in St. John.

"It's pretty emotional, actually," says Stille, who started flipping burgers for his dad in 1978. "The publicity we're getting on [closing] is bittersweet—it's like a car wreck. People want to slow down and look. It's quite sad."

(People also want to slow down and look at the restaurant's big sign, which is currently



a ghost of its former self. A particularly violent storm blew it apart last year, says Stille; knowing he was shutting down, he never had it fixed. What used to trumpet "Chuck-A-Burger" now just cryptically says "A.")

The St. Charles Rock Road location

is the last of eight Chuck-A-Burgers that once dotted St. Louis County, but there is a lone survivor across the Missouri River. Two years ago, Stille opened a Chuck-A-Burger—Cruise Nights and all—in St. Charles. It's all about retro good times—the carhops there wear bobby socks and saddle shoes, the walls are lined with Marilyn Monroe posters and ads for old cars—but it doesn't have a long history of its own. By comparison, two generations of Normandy, Ritenour, Pattonville and Berkeley High students grew up canoodling at the St. John location.

Stille says he has plans for a big farewell blowout some time this month. He'll probably drive his black 1957 Chevy to the party, wade amid a hundred other classic cars and commune with his people to the sounds of '50s rock 'n' roll. It may be better to burn out than it is to rust, but it's always hard to say goodbye to an old friend.

—Byron Kerman



A (Thom) Wall of fire

PHOTOGRAPH BY DILIP VISHWANATH

THE BOSSES OF TOSS

When did St. Louis become the juggling Mecca of the Midwest?

As any hip-hop aficionado could tell you, St. Louis certainly has its share of *ballers*—and significant showbiz cred to boot. But these days the city is gaining credence with a new brand of baller: the juggler.

So it probably stands to reason that a horde of these hot-handed ballistas is coming to town this month, when Washington University's National Prestigious Society of Collegiate Jugglers hosts Jugglefest '07. Performers at the festival's public showcase on October 6 will include single-forearmed juggler Casey Boehmer, juggling contortionist Book Kennison and local phenom Cameron Ritter, who ranks among the top six underage jugglers in the world.

St. Louis, it seems, is a burgeoning Mecca for juggling. Jugglefest's entire lineup, in fact, hails from within a 350-mile radius of the city: Kennison and Ritter grew up in St. Charles; Boehmer is the second-oldest member of Jerseyville, Ill.'s 13-member (!) Boehmer Family juggling clan; and the juggling team Passing Fancy, a.k.a. the club-tossing duo of Jim Hendricks and society president Thom Wall, has been practicing here for nearly five years. The Institute of Jugglology springs from only slightly farther afield—just below the southwestern Missouri border in Springdale, Ark.

Could the city's rising obsession with, er, flying balls have something to do with its aerospace-industry ties, with both Boeing and SLU's Parks College within driving distance, and the University of Missouri-Rolla (soon to be known as Missouri Science & Technology) about two hours away? Get that many flight-obsessed math geeks in one area and *something* is bound to get airborne, right? Wall thinks that math adds up.

"A lot of people that juggle are in IT or mathematics," he says. "I mean, I can't add for the life of me, but Jim [Hendricks], he's an engineer for Boeing ... and there are like three math professors from UMSL and one of the community colleges who come to the club now and then."

That skill-set may also explain juggling's demographics. "I would be willing to bet that 90 percent of jugglers are single and male," Wall says. "So you know, if you're looking for a lonely husband ..."

—Margaret Bauer