

# B Y T E { || SUMMER DINING || } M E

## ATARI FOUNDER NOLAN BUSHNELL BELIEVES ONE PART FOOD, ONE PART VIDEO-GAME IS A RECIPE FOR FOSTERING HUMAN INTERACTION ~ BY MIKE WINDER ~

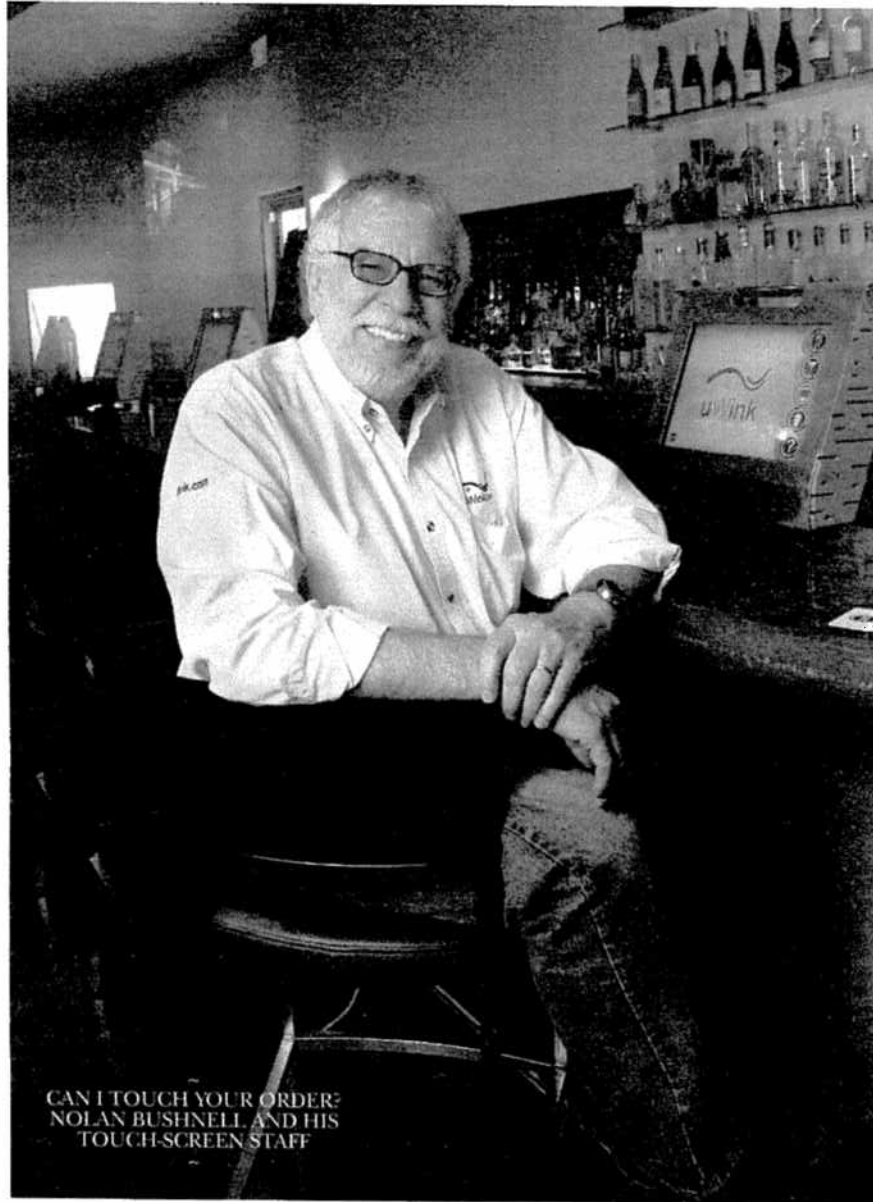
IN THE VIDEOGAME *BURGERTIME*, released in 1982, assembling a hamburger is no simple task. As chef Peter Pepper, the player climbs dozens of ladders in order to drop meat patties, buns, and lettuce down several levels into a serving tray. As if that wasn't a Herculean task in itself, the player, armed only with a pepper-shaker, also has to fend off evil-doer condiments like Mr. Hot Dog, Mr. Pickle, and Mr. Egg.

Thankfully, building your own burger at the videogame-themed uWink restaurant in Woodland Hills bears absolutely no resemblance to Pepper's challenge. A few taps of a touch-screen terminal is all it takes to have a runner bring out your customized patty, or, if you prefer, grilled tofu with wild mushrooms, Swiss cheese, and smoked paprika mayonnaise.

uWink is the creation of Nolan Bushnell, the man who, as the founder and then CEO of Atari, brought videogames to the masses with *Pong* in the early '70s. That two-player electronic table tennis game—which got its start at two Northern California bars—became an overnight success and launched the videogame revolution. Later, as founder and then CEO of Chuck E. Cheese's Pizza Time Theater, Bushnell introduced a generation of children and unwitting parents to a raucous dining experience that included videogames, a costumed rat mascot, singing animatronic animals, and, oh yes, pizza.

But foodies hoping to wax nostalgic with hound dog Jasper T. Jowls or purple monster Mr. Munch need not bother with uWink. Bushnell's latest venture is decidedly more adult. He says the restaurant's target demographic is women ages 21 to 35. The name "uWink," in fact, is meant to conjure "food, flirting, and technology." To get you in the mood, the lounge-like décor includes ambient lighting; crisp white walls; projected imagery and videos; and dark wood and leather furnishings. uWink serves what's called "modern comfort food with a global influence" in an environment that Bushnell dubs an "interactive, social restaurant."

Ironically, an absence of waiters is one of the first things new visitors notice—touch-screen terminals at every table and barstool await your order instead. While the cooks prepare your selections, you can play dozens of videogames at your terminal, ranging from trivia-centered ones like *Expert* or *Zillionaire* (think *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*) to the mahjong-tile based *Shanghai Express*. Party tables feature six-player versions of electronic foosball and a game similar to *Pong*. A wine-tasting game mixes the virtual with the real by having you pinpoint subtleties in the sight, smell, and flavor of actual glasses of wine. There are also "After Dark" games that activate after 10 p.m.—a grown-up *Truth or Dare*, for example, or games that award prizes such as lingerie and fuzzy handcuffs.



CAN I TOUCH YOUR ORDER? NOLAN BUSHNELL AND HIS TOUCH-SCREEN STAFF

PHOTOGRAPH BY MAURA LANAHAN

"The driving force behind the restaurant is that there's a need for social games," says Bushnell. "A lot of games have become very isolating. Historically, games have been for parties, banquets, and festivals. I believe people like people," he says. "And they need social games."

Bushnell opened uWink in October 2006. One month later, Nintendo released its wildly successful Wii videogame system. Nintendo has actively courted nontraditional gamers with the Wii, using ads featuring families, business men, and even the elderly, playing virtual bowling and tennis. The strategy harkens back to the early days of videogames—before the market became preoccupied with pre-adolescent boys. It's a model that's gaining momentum in the gaming industry again, and motivating Bushnell.

"We feel many people haven't played a videogame in 20 years, or maybe they've never played one in their life," he says. "They've determined in their mind, 'I'm not a game player.' We feel like we have an ability to change that. So at uWink we en-

courage people to try something, and a half-hour later they're still playing. So in that sense we're being somewhat evangelistic."

Then again, it is theoretically possible to visit uWink and ignore the games altogether. Greg Schroepfel, uWink's executive chef and an alumnus of Wolfgang Puck's Spago, is proud of the quality of the food they offer. "Often with themed restaurants, the food becomes secondary," says Schroepfel. "So we've gone out of our way to make the food an experience in itself. It can stand on its own without the technology," he insists.

Schroepfel acknowledges the menu may not be as futuristic as the setting—it offers plenty of traditional items like pasta, pizza, and sandwiches. But he tries to add exotic flavors. "We take spices from all over the world... to create textures and colors that are unique and make a much bigger bang on the palate," he says. Entrées include braised, boneless short ribs with wild mushrooms and balsamic reduction, and a southwestern Caesar salad flavored with cumin and cilantro, plus

roasted red peppers, spiced pepitas, and cotija cheese. "The pepitas add a layer of flavor and texture that most people have not experienced," says Schroepfel.

Still, he concedes that one of the most popular items on the menu is the "Build Your Own" burger. And since there are no waiters to take the order, customers can spend as much time as they need deliberating whether to add crispy fried onion strings, guava barbecue sauce, or just pickles.

But why eliminate a traditional waiter in an environment designed to foster human interaction? "We wanted to take out the drudgery of the waiter-client experience," explains Bushnell. "The waiters are still here. They talk to you. They show you the food and the games that they like. They just don't have to worry about getting the order right."

Perhaps. But no traditional waiter also means nobody asks whether appetizers should be brought out simultaneously with entrées. And thus a dilemma: Let those pork sliders go cold, or eat in front of your friend who ordered the salmon sandwich?

The lack of a "pause" feature on the games also creates an awkward situation. What do you do when food-delivering runners interrupt your time-sensitive trivia match? Do you dismiss the game, or do you blow off the individuals bringing you sustenance?

These are the kinds of glitches that will be worked out as the software is upgraded, Bushnell assures. He says the uWink in Woodland Hills is the restaurant's beta test. In 2008 the company will expand to locations at the Hollywood & Highland Center and the Promenade at the Howard Hughes Center. These restaurants will be larger (6,500-square feet for Hollywood & Highland versus Woodland Hills's 5,300-square feet), have a center stage for live quiz shows, and private rooms for parties.

The future, says Bushnell, promises endless levels of excitement.

"The software is never finished," he enthuses. "We're going to be rolling out new stuff forever. And once we get the other two locations open, you're going to find that this will look like a networked environment. Things changed here will be modified there."

Does this mean uWink could potentially host games pitting the Valley versus the City?

"You got it," says Bushnell with a smile. "The whole nine yards. And things will get even more interesting when it's Japan versus the United States." ♣

**uWink, Westfield Promenade Shopping Center, 6100 Topanga Canyon Blvd., Woodland Hills, (818) 992-1100. Uwink.com. Open daily.**