

Dialogue



Abi-Haus is a Texas restaurant with a New York City vibe that features designs and handlettering by co-owner Ryan Feerer.

Dana Tanamachi and Jeff Rogers, friends of Feerer and fellow artists, also lent a hand to create the custom typefaces.



Designing Dining

Illustrator Ryan Feerer mixes artistic passion with community pride to create a unique dining experience for customers at his Texas restaurant. by Steven Heller

Ryan Feerer, a designer and illustrator from Abilene, TX, is the program director of the graphic design/advertising concentration at Abilene Christian University. He also runs the properly named Ryan Feerer Design & Illustration. A graduate of the School of Visual Arts M.F.A. Design:

Designer as Author + Entrepreneur, Feerer is also an entrepreneur in the restaurant business, as a co-owner of Abi-Haus, with his friend Jim Jackson. Arguably, after illustration, restaurants are the most difficult businesses to stay afloat. I asked Feerer how he manages to balance art and commerce, as well as stay healthy, happy and profitable.

How's the illustration business these days?

It depends on how you want to define illustration. To me, creating brand marks and icons are the simplest forms of illustration. If you count that, I'm constantly illustrating. In the traditional sense, it probably makes up about 25% of my business. I pride myself on the craft of handmade marks. I'll always do something by hand if it's appropriate for the audience.

Can an illustrator/designer make a good living in your city?

Abilene is a wonderful place to live. There are so many opportunities here, but most of them you have to make for yourself. I rarely take on jobs in Abilene, unless it's something I'm directly involved with. The main issue I've come across is budget constraints. Most of my work comes from either the east or west coasts or is international.

How's the restaurant business these days?

Everyone wants and needs a good, unique meal on occasion. Our emotions play a big role in that. We want to give our patrons a home away from home. We have several customers that frequent Abi-Haus three or four times a week. They feel loved, needed and part of the family. We're all about developing lasting relationships and having a good time.

Is illustration somehow connected to starting your café?

I haven't really thought about it. I guess you could say that. As a creative, we should have a passion to create. What I find magical about being a designer-turned-restaurateur is that you have the opportunity to touch all of the customer's senses. You can design their experience with the visuals of murals and menus, the smell and taste of the food, the touch of our hand-crafted tables, the sounds of good music and conversation. Nothing feels better than to sit back and watch all of these elements come together, knowing you played a major role creating it. It's the ultimate design high.

You attended the M.F.A. Design program. Did that give you the urge to go into business for yourself?

Of course. I learned so much during the time I was studying at SVA. It was a lot of information in such a short time. It took quite awhile for me to step back, examine what I'd learned and dive into a big project

dialogue



Drawing from his design experience, Ryan Feerer created the logo, secondary logo, menu and icons for his restaurant.

With Dana Tanamachi, Feerer also hand-illustrated the phrase "Abilene I Can Fly" in the restaurant to encourage community pride.

like this. I'd also say there's a bit of naiveté going into this type of venture. Being confident in yourself and knowing you can adapt is important. As creatives, we're asked to do this every day. Say 'yes' to (almost) everything. It will be stressful at times, but you'll grow tremendously.

You've used some great handletterers to decorate your restaurant. How did this come about? I wanted the restaurant to give the community a strong sense of pride with the phrase 'Long Live Abilene' as the focus. I'm fortunate enough to be good friends with Jeff Rogers, who lived in Abilene while attending Abilene Christian University. I approached him about the project, and he was immediately on board. Rogers asked if we should bring on Dana Tanamachi, who's a fellow Texan and

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friend, to collaborate with us. I gave them my vision and what I was hoping to accomplish. In return, they helped me create something much more beautiful than I could've ever imagined.

Are you able to do commercial design and illustration while being a proprietor of an ancillary business? Yes, quite a bit. I manage my time pretty well, so that's been helpful.

What will be the measure of your success?

For the restaurant, we're coming up on our one-year mark, and we haven't closed down, so that's a huge success in my eyes. Abi-Haus is doing incredibly well. There isn't anything like it in town. It definitely has a New York vibe, which a lot of people in Abilene haven't experienced. It's refreshing for our customers to have a nice in-town getaway. We've had many folks from Austin and Dallas tell us that they wish we'd open one in their cities. Our locals see this and have a great sense of pride that something like this exists in their town.

Are there other entrepreneurial activities happening or on the horizon? For almost two years, a friend and I have been brewing BBQ sauce. I would love to take that to the next level, but the time isn't right. ■