



An employee readies the Corner Lunch Diner in Worcester, Mass., for customers hungry for good cheap eats. (Photo credit: Richard J. S. Gutman.)

Dig into the All-American Diner for Appetizing History

By Richard J. S. Gutman

What makes diners, the most palatable of casual restaurants, prototypically American and a source of national pride?

A quick answer might be that the “democratic” counter, for one, is uniquely American. Patrons from all walks of life elbow up next to each other and sit on stools, inches apart, one eater just like the next.

Customers choose from a huge variety of items at reasonable prices, and that dynamic, too, symbolizes the country. The bounty of the menu is as expansive as the nation and the affordability appeals to all classes.

And the diner is a place for a quick meal — the diner is practical — or a spot to linger over coffee and pie that is still homemade — the diner is entertaining. The diner provides a type of cozy, low-key consumer service. Though the service is fast and inexpensive, there is no rush to vacate your stool. It’s up to you how long to stay and how far to make your money go.

But to get a fuller sense of what diners mean to the U.S., some culinary history is in order because America is a mix of many cultures, and the diner — the quintessential American eatery — reflects the diversity with its food.

Eat at Joe’s lunch cart

“Sandwiches, pies, coffee, milk and cigars.” This menu emblazoned the colored-glass windows of the early lunch wagons, precursors to today’s familiar diners.

In 1872, lunch wagons were pulled by horses

through the streets of New England’s industrial towns — Providence, R.I., and Worcester, Springfield and Lynn, Mass. — where late-night workers were in search of a meal during breaks in their shifts, when all restaurants were closed.

Food was wrapped in butcher paper and delivered immediately to curbside customers. These quick meals, stemming from the need to feed the Industrial Revolution, were America’s first fast food.

You could order the entire bill of fare and finish off your repast with a post-prandial smoke.

Come in, sit down, order up

The success of the night wagons led to congestion in the streets, forcing cities to legislate against them. Operators promptly looked for permanent locations, with water, gas and electric hookups. In April 1908, Boston required lunch wagons to move off the streets. Permanence allowed them to serve customers 24 hours a day.

An expansion of the menu soon followed, as did the expansion of the business down the East Coast and toward the Midwest in the mid 1920s.

Built in East Coast factories and sold for \$5,000 to \$11,000 in 1925 (when a Model T cost \$300 and a Packard Phaeton would set you back \$3,975), most of the diners opened for business nearby. However, if the owner was willing to pay the cost of shipping, a diner could be sent as far as California, on barges through the Panama Canal, though few were.

Almost all were long, narrow, prefabricated

restaurants, with counter service and booths as well; they typically sat between 10 and 40 patrons. A 1952 magazine article in *Fortune* estimated that there were more than 5,000 diners in operation. Now, I would put that number around 2,000.

Their home-style cooking in a cozy setting has always provided great value.

In 1932, Parks’ Diner in Waterville, Maine, served a Heavy Sirloin Steak and French Fries for 85 cents. (The Minute Steak was 60 cents and the Hamburg Steak — the name then for hamburger — was 30 cents.) You also could get Asparagus Tips on Toast for 30 cents. For context, the average U.S. salary then was \$26 a week.

And today, the Seaplane Diner in Providence, R.I., still delivers a great meal at a low price: the ever-popular meatloaf dinner, with mashed potatoes and a vegetable, for \$6.25.

Sample your regional favorite

Corporate fast food has come to mean homogeneity; you know it will be the same, whether you buy it in Buffalo or Birmingham. Diners, on the other hand, with menus generically similar, have their own personalities, reflected in the food.

A hamburger ordered at one mom-and-pop diner will be different from that at the competing one down the block. For example, around World War I, the *Desdemona*, a handful of ground steak stirred up with an egg and fried, was a favorite at the Cornell Café. This lunch cart on the fringes of the university campus in Ithaca, N.Y., also was known as the *Sibley Dog*, a reference to the popularity of its frankfurters and its proximity to Sibley Hall, home of the school of architecture.

The location of your diner also could determine what appeared on the menu. The Boggs brothers, Ray and Herb, operated



Mike Hamzy’s classic 1942 diner (top left) offers Middle Eastern specialties. Steaks and Chops were featured in this New York City lunch car in 1918 (top right). The Highway Diner (bottom left) in Burlington, N.J., catered to truck drivers plying Route 130. The China Star (bottom right) was a rare Chinese diner in West Springfield, Mass. (Photo credit: Richard J. S. Gutman.)



the Airway Diner in San Diego. In July 1942, their appetizer, an Avocado Cocktail for 35 cents, was very Southern California, since San Diego County was the leading producer of avocados in the country. And their fish offering, Grilled Catalina Swordfish for 85 cents, was caught nearby off Santa Catalina Island.

Uncle Bob’s Diner was delivered to Flint, Mich., from Elizabeth, N.J., in 1947. The decidedly Northeast menu in 1953 was rife with Jewish deli food: an 83-cent special of Smoked White Fish, Sliced Tomatoes, Cream Cheese and Toasted Bagel; a Kosher Style Pickled Tongue Sandwich for 63 cents; or a Chopped Chicken Liver Sandwich with Chicken Fat, at 58 cents.

Blue-plate specials come in many shades

Regional dishes and new twists on old favorites always have accompanied the classic blue-plate specials on diner menus. One expects blue-plate specials like meatloaf and mashed potatoes or an open-faced hot roast beef sandwich with fries at a diner. But in New Bedford, Mass., with its high concentration of Portuguese immigrants, linguica sausage is a staple.

As early as 1972, Mike Hamzy, a Lebanese immigrant and owner of Collin’s Diner in Canaan, Conn., augmented his “regular” menu

with 14 Middle East specialties. Some of these were Rus and Yaknia (a stew of fried rice with lima beans and beef) for \$2.75; Kibbe Bissonee (lamb or beef mixed with wheat, stuffed walnuts and onion) for \$3.95; and Emjadura (wheat, lentils and onion, sautéed with olive oil) for \$2.25.

The influx of Greek immigrants to the diner business, starting in the 1930s, has made kebabs and gyro sandwiches popular offerings at many diners. The stuffed grape leaves and pita bread at the Park West Diner in Little Falls, N.J., reside on a menu today with standard American fare.

Kumm Esse Diner, in Myerstown, Pa., telegraphs its German roots in its name, which means “Come Eat.” The Pennsylvania Dutch fare is typified by the potpie. In this region, the “pie” is cooked in a pot and served as a stew, with noodles, meat and potatoes, whereas everywhere else, these dishes are served with a pastry crust.

Kumm Esse Diner, which opened in 1959, also offers scrapple with its eggs. This regional specialty is made of scraps of pork, stewed with cornmeal, formed into loaves, sliced and then fried.

Diners whip up contemporary fare

Nowadays, something else is cooking in diners: healthiness and hipness.

The towering stacks of pancakes and immense blueberry muffins are likely to be made without trans fats, leaving the artery-clogging reputation of diners behind in the 20th century.

Locavores (those who prefer to eat only foods grown locally) and fans of green dining (those who favor environmentally friendly restaurants) in Providence, R.I., can head to the recently reopened Liberty Elm Diner. This 1947 barrel-roofed diner, built by the Worcester Lunch Car Company, offers fair trade coffee, locally bottled Yacht Club Sodas, many vegetarian and vegan dishes, and made-to-order panini.

If you’re heading there, bring your laptop, for this is the first diner I know of that features free Wi-Fi, or high-speed wireless local area networking.

By doing so, the Liberty Elm, a public hotspot in more ways than one (it also offers live music on weekends), expands on the diner tradition of allowing you to take your time and eat up the atmosphere, while catching up on your email. ■



For more diner photos and an annotated reading list about diners, go online to: <http://www.PhiKappaPhi.org/Web/Publications/Forum/summer09/diners>



Richard J. S. Gutman is the director and curator of the Culinary Arts Museum at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, R.I. He is the author of six books, including four on the history of diners, such as *American Diner Then and Now* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) and *The Worcester Lunch Car Company* (Arcadia Publishing, 2004). His work on diners led to a front-page profile in *The Wall Street Journal* and a story in “The Talk of the Town” in *The New Yorker*. Gutman can be heard frequently on National Public Radio discussing diners, Mallomars and mayonnaise. He has consulted on more than 80 new and old diner projects since 1978. Gutman graduated with a Bachelor of Architecture from Cornell University in 1972. Email him at rgutman@jwu.edu.