

RHODESIDE DIARIES

BY CHRISTOPHER MARTIN
PHOTOS BY CAROLE TOPALIAN

WORKING ANTIQUES

Lesser-Known Diners of Greater Rhode Island

There's one in the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan.

Clinton, Oklahoma's Route 66 Museum has one.

There's even one closer to home at the Culinary Archives and Museum at Johnson & Wales University in Providence.

I'm talking about good old 20th century diners, which are old enough, attractive enough and enough a part of America's collective memory to be considered worth preserving inside temperature- and humidity-controlled museums.

It's great that those diners are being taken care of for future generations but in a way they're in stasis, like mounted butterflies in a hermetically sealed case. The fact is, there are diners just as old, just as stylish and just as full of history that are open and serving food right now, right here in our state. Given the choice, would you rather visit a diner in a museum where you can read about it on a little plaque; or would it be better to visit a working diner, where you can order up a big stack of pancakes and trade jokes and political banter with the grill man and your fellow patrons?

Let's go!

Bristol's Hope Diner doesn't look like a classic manufactured diner from the outside. Nor from the inside—but believe it or not, under all that wood, paint and suspended ceiling lurks a vintage, early 1930s Worcester Lunch Car—tin ceiling, wheels and all.

The diner was opened by Alfred Duffy on Bradford Street sometime prior to 1935 as Duffy's Mount Hope Diner. At 60 feet long by 15 feet wide, Duffy's was probably a stock model, ordered directly out of the Worcester Lunch Car Company catalog. It's not clear, however, if Alfred Duffy was the first owner.

In 1935 Duffy moved his diner a few blocks north to its present location. The diner was nearly destroyed when the hurricane of '38 slammed through. Wind and water did damage directly but the diner also suffered from being buffeted by cars that floated away from a nearby auto dealership (located where the Sip N' Dip is now). For whatever reason, Duffy chose to rebuild the diner rather than replace it with a new one. He enclosed the diner in a new wooden shell and painted it white.

Ownership of the diner between Duffy's time and the present owners is shrouded in mystery. I've seen one photo dating from the 1950s or '60s in which the name on the diner is "Paul's."

Around 1982 the diner was bought by Mickey and Dorothy Silva and they, along with daughter Lorene and her husband Bobby, continue to run it today. Mickey mans the grill and dispenses eggs, jokes and political commentary in pretty much equal measure, while Lorene, as head waitress, more or less lends some form of order to the proceedings.

Nevertheless, on a recent visit the diner appeared to be in delightful chaos, with several conversations taking place at once between patrons and wait staff while food sizzled and plates passed back and forth. A little girl, goddaughter of one of the Silvas, was endeavoring to get anywhere she wasn't allowed to be and customers good-naturedly pitched in to corral her. When I revealed I was writing an article on the diner, Lorene pulled out a large manila envelope filled with newspaper articles and old photos of the diner and its staff. As we looked through them I felt as though I had walked in on the reunion of an extended family at which everyone is welcome. Apparently that's just the way it is every day at the Hope.

Among the notable offerings on the menu are various chourico preparations, Portuguese sweet bread French toast, Portuguese muffins, coffee milk and the "house specialty," the O'Doris, an English muffin topped with one egg, melted cheese and ham, bacon, or sausage, served with home fries. There's also the Bobby 'O, a veggie omelet made with peppers, mushrooms, onions, tomatoes and cheese. Much of the food is fresh and homemade, including their corned beef, Italian sausage, chourico and fish hashes. The latter two were specials when I visited.



Hope Diner

742 Hope St., Bristol
401-253-1759
Tues through Fri, 6 AM to 2 PM
Saturday and Sunday, 6 AM to 1 PM

Liberty Elm Coffee Shop

777 Elmwood Ave., Providence
401-467-0777
Mon through Fri 6:30 AM to 6:30 PM
Saturday, 8 AM to 4 PM
Sunday, 8 AM to 2 PM

State Line Diner

195 Danielson Pike (Rte. 6), Foster
401-647-9951
Mon through Sat, 6 AM to 2 PM
Sunday, 7 AM to 2 PM



**Left: The Liberty Elm
Right: Inside a 1947 Worcester Lunch Car,
The Liberty Elm**



Next stop is the Liberty Elm Coffee Shop in Providence, a 1947 Worcester Lunch Car and a rare specimen that was specially designed to be fireproof. It opened in 1949 on a lot on West Exchange Street in Providence, the current site of the Westin Hotel. When the owner of the property decided to build a parking lot around 1952, the diner was moved to its present location on Elmwood Avenue. Between then and now it's been known as the Elmwood Diner, Jim's Diner, Jenn's Elmwood Diner, Ole Elmwood Diner, Louie's Diner, Roberto's Cafe and La Criolla Restaurant.

By 2003 the diner was on the skids, a victim of financial mismanagement. It had been closed for a few years when local musician Carol DeFeciani (aka Kip McCloud) found it. She had been looking for an Elmwood area property where she could open a café. While she hadn't had a historic diner in mind, she could see the possibilities. She purchased the diner in mid-2006 and 13 months later, after renovations costing tens of thousands of dollars, Worcester Lunch Car #805 reopened as the Liberty Elm.

Carol's plans for the diner go far beyond merely offering fried foods for sale. In fact, the Liberty Elm is not your traditional greasy spoon. The menu consists of fresh-baked muffins and pastries, pizza, pressed panini sandwiches, quesadillas with homemade salsa, salads made from locally grown greens and made-to-order fruit smoothies, among other things. The orange juice and lemonade are fresh-squeezed and the coffee is organic fair-trade from Pawtucket's New Harvest Coffee Roasters.

Carol would like the Liberty Elm to become a center of community activity and activism. The cinderblock addition at the back of the diner includes a dining area with free wi-fi that doubles as a neighborhood meeting space and art gallery. Sunday mornings the room is home to the Americana Breakfast Club, a low-key venue for roots musicians to ply their craft.

Plans also include an adjunct garden center and farmstand, selling seasonal flowers, fruits and vegetables. Ultimately, Carol hopes to change the face of Elmwood Avenue itself: one percent of profits from the Liberty Elm will go toward the purchase of American Liberty elm

trees, a variety that is resistant to Dutch elm disease. The trees will be planted along Elmwood Avenue so that the street may someday live up to its name once more.

The last stop on this diner tour is the State Line Diner, a handsome red-paneled Worcester Lunch Car (#846) that has done a bit of traveling. Manufactured in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1955, it began its useful life (so far as I know) as Ricky's Kitchen in Gales Ferry, Connecticut. It wasn't until sometime in the 1970s that the diner was moved 40 miles northeast to Foster.

The name comes from the fact that the diner is only about 1,900 feet from the state border. A large rear addition was added prior to 1994, when Scott and Gayle Kopka began leasing the diner. By February 1999 they decided to plunk down the \$50,000 to buy it. At that time business was booming with truckers lined up out the door waiting for a seat. That's not so much the case these days but the Kopkas still have a steady clientele of mostly Connecticut drivers.

The menu at the State Line is composed of basic, stick-to-your-ribs diner food. Gayle emphasizes that everything is fresh, including seasonal vegetables that the Kopkas buy locally. They boast that their fish and chips are second to none. The secret, says Gayle, is the dry batter. The chips are made on-site and even the coleslaw is homemade. While I was there a customer came in and, hearing I was writing about the State Line, without prompting confirmed that the fish and chips was a must-try. I'll be back to do just that.

Don't wait for these diners to become museum pieces. Visit them now while you can still get a friendly cup of coffee or a steaming order of Yankee pot roast and mashed potatoes with gravy on the side.

A working diner is a living diner and a living diner is making history every day. *eR*