

The History of Diners in New Jersey

Michael C. Gabriele

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If you live in New Jersey, or if you have ever visited the Garden State, chances are you've eaten at a diner. Although diners are found in many parts of the country, New Jersey is regarded as "The Diner Capital of America." The sleek roadside eateries conjure up thoughts of down-home friendliness and comfort food. *The History of Diners in New Jersey* stimulates the reader's senses with memories of hearty soups, buttered pancakes, eggs over easy with bacon, and juicy burgers. Then, of course, there's the aroma of robust coffee which "flows like Niagara Falls," and the taste of all-American apple pie.

Author Michael C. Gabriele provides a history of the design elements of diners, and yet balances the technical side with the human side. The diner isn't merely a convenient place to eat, it's a cultural phenomenon. Gabriele, who has worked as a journalist for over thirty-five years, writes in an easily digestible style. The Introduction immediately grabs the reader with an emotional tale about the 1977 demolition of The Franklin Diner in Nutley.

Horse-drawn lunch wagons were the forerunners of modern diners. All sorts of people have frequented diners over the years, but the early ones catered to the "night lunch" crowd (shift workers who needed to find a place open late). A diner is a prefabricated eatery, not a storefront property or a site built restaurant.

A key figure in the history of diner development was Jerry O'Mahony from Bayonne. He sold his first lunch wagon on July 3, 1912, a date which marks the beginning of New Jersey's diner history because "it documents a lunch wagon built and bought by Jersey guys." It was O'Mahony who transformed the mobile, horse-drawn lunch wagon into a larger eatery at a fixed location. Many other diner makers soon followed in O'Mahony's footsteps. Gabriele goes into

great detail about the lives of these innovative “sculptors” and their contributions to the diner industry. Herbert Enyart, who began his career in 1952 with the Paterson Vehicle Company’s Silk City Diners, represents the last New Jersey diner manufacturer standing. He still operates PMC Diners Inc. in Oakland, formerly known as Paramount Diners, which began in 1932.

European immigrants found that the diner could be a means of making the American dream a reality. Many Greek Americans, some of whom “jumped ship” near the Jersey coast, found jobs in the food industry during the early 20th century. A number of them opened diners with little experience but worked hard and became prosperous. Most diners are family owned businesses, passed down through generations.

In an especially fun-to-read section, “Confessions of a Sassy Waitress,” Laurie Ross, a diner waitress with over forty-five years of experience, says it’s all about “the rush.” Before social media, the diner waitress was often the best resource for local information.

Dozens of illustrations enhance this book. They span the years from the simple lunch wagons of the early twentieth century through the elaborate silvery diners of the 1950s, 60s and beyond. An eight-page color insert shows the vibrant hues of the diners and their unique signs as well as close ups of meals to whet your appetite

Eventually, drive-ins and fast food franchises took over most of the roadside business. But diners never claimed to serve “fast food,” only to provide fast service and a place to relax or socialize. Organic, gluten free, and vegan foods are trendy in our health conscious culture nowadays, but many Americans still crave traditional diner food. Food trucks featuring all sorts of cuisine are popular but can’t compare with the experience of sitting on a diner stool or at a booth. The surviving vintage New Jersey diners are rapidly becoming endangered and several

historic preservation groups recognize the need to rescue them. Some vintage diners have been destroyed; others have been moved to new locations, even to other countries.

This well-researched book gives the reader an appreciation for New Jersey diners, both past and present. In the spirit of Nick Ramoundos, who owned The Tick Tock Diner, author Gabriele sums it all up: “Eat heavy, my friends. Eat heavy.”

An exhibit, “Icons of American Culture: History of New Jersey Diners,” is on display through June 2016 at The Middlesex County Museum, 1225 River Road, Piscataway. Author Michael C. Gabriele is the co-curator.

Karen L. Schnitzspahn

Author and Historian