

## **Johnson & Wales Culinary Arts Museum: From Diners and Taverns to White House Menus and Vintage Microwaves**

I entered the Culinary Arts Museum with trepidation, fearing endless exhibits of soup tureens and salad forks, broken up by instructional videos on braising and refrigeration. My worries, thankfully, proved groundless. The museum, housed at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, does focus on food, but in its broadest sense: how its preparation, marketing, and consumption are part of American culture and history.

The museum's exhibits examine both the business and the technology of food preparation, with side trips into how food and cooking have figured into daily life for regular Americans as well as presidents.

The centerpiece is a spacious exhibit on the country's original fast-food restaurant, the diner, which had its origins in Providence in 1872 as a horse-drawn lunch wagon. Diners have become an enduring icon of 20th-century American life, but ultimately, says Richard Gutman, director and curator of the museum, "They are places where you feel comfortable."

"Diners: Still Cookin' in the 21st Century" traces the evolution of their design and function, complete with Formica lunch counter. It also houses the actual Ever Ready Diner, which operated in Providence into the 1980s, as well as a re-creation of an early Maine diner.

Gutman, who has written several books on diners, says that much attention has been lavished on classic diner design (the neon, Naugahyde booths, and Art Deco influences), but one of the most interesting things about them is how they have been able to adapt and survive. Many have been rejuvenated with new menus offering multicultural fare such as quesadillas and fajitas to supplement the blue-plate specials of previous eras.

Another exhibit is devoted to taverns, inns, and bars. It includes a partial replica of a saloon, and a reconstituted Stoddard, N.H., tavern dating to 1833. It features a bar, a fold-down bed (for the stage coach driver), and other original elements including boot boxes and a locking cabinet in which the liquor was kept. It's a far cry from today's martini bar.

The technology used in food preparation has also changed radically over time, and this development is charted in "Stoves and Ranges: From the Open Hearth to the Microwave." Not surprisingly, the exhibit features many cast-iron stoves, including a Civil War-era model adorned with patriotic eagles and stars and stripes. A piece that seems nearly as ancient is an early microwave: a 120-pound, 3 1/2-foot-tall 1960s Radarange Mark IV.

Among the exhibits focusing on culture is the "Szathmary Presidential Collection," which includes White House menus, cookbooks, and dishes. One of the highlights is food-related White House correspondence: A 1906 letter to a fishing club proprietor from President Theodore Roosevelt begins, "That is a beautiful salmon," and promises that it will be served to the French ambassador. A 1908 note from President Taft reads, "Thank you for sending me the box of cake, which Mrs. Taft and I will have much pleasure in using."

A recent addition to the permanent collection is "Country Fair to Culinary Olympics," which focuses on the country fair and its union of agriculture, animal husbandry, amusement, and food competition. The exhibit links yesteryear's pie contests to today's international cooking extravaganzas. "It's not just a nostalgia trip," says Gutman of the playful exhibit. "It's a place where the visitor can see where we've come from and where we're going."

The museum also features changing exhibits including "Dripping with Color: The Art of the Fruit Crate Label" which was on display in 2008 and early 2009. Many are familiar with the stunning graphics that adorned the sides of California fruit crates, but Gutman says the exhibit was designed to go beyond the labels to look at the industry as a whole. "Without the fruit, without the growers, without the lithographers and the people building the crates, you have nothing," he notes.

The museum's food tent is big, and even includes displays of work executed by students at its host university, one of the nation's top culinary schools. You needn't be a foodie to find something to chew on, and the only thing missing is the aroma of cooking itself.

### **IF YOU GO**

Culinary Arts Museum at Johnson & Wales University  
315 Harborside Boulevard, Providence  
(401) 598-2805

[www.culinary.org](http://www.culinary.org)

Tuesday-Sunday 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

The museum follows the university's calendar for holiday closings. Adults \$7, seniors \$6, college students with valid ID \$3, children ages 5-18 \$2, under 5 free

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