

## Rhode Island and Diner History

Rhode Island figures heavily in *The History of New England Diners*, a production of Rhode Island PBS, and for good reason -- the first diner was Walter Scott's horse-drawn lunch cart, which made its appearance on Providence streets in the 1870s.

The Haven Brothers diner, still going strong in its nocturnal location outside Providence City Hall, debuted in 1893, and similarly was a "a horse-drawn lunch wagon." And though Providence gave birth to the diner, Worcester perfected it, introducing the novel idea of indoor seating. Moreover, Worcester emerged as the "diner capital of the world" when it became the center of diner manufacture in the early 1900s, with the Worcester Lunch Car Company leading the way.

"The diner is the original fast food restaurant," says diner historian Richard Gutman in *The History of New England Diners*, which was first broadcast on Rhode Island PBS in 2008.

The program features the Hope Diner in Bristol, Bishop's Diner in Newport, and Champs, a shuttered Woonsocket eatery. Unlike junk food chains, diners are invariably locally owned family businesses, and customers wax enthusiastic not just about the food, but also the camaraderie of the places, and the graciousness of the proprietors.

Diners remain popular in New England, particularly in Rhode Island. Gutman, who has written several books on diners and serves as curator and director of the Culinary Arts Museum at Johnson & Wales University, describes them as "comfortable places that fit the Yankee lifestyle."

Rhode Island diners have tended to be small, low-key neighborhood joints, as opposed to the larger stainless steel and/or stucco operations seen in New Jersey and elsewhere.

Diners stress good food (with a much greater range of choices than fast food chains), personal service, and reasonable prices, but they also have an iconic appeal. "There's a real diner culture out there," noted the show's producer, Mary Lou Palumbo, in a phone interview. Palumbo, who grew up in Bristol, says she is partial to the Hope Diner locally, as well as the Maine Diner in Wells, Maine.

The Hope Diner and Newport's Bishop's Diner are still going strong, but Woonsocket's Champs, a 24-hour meeting place for generations of mill workers, closed its doors in 1989.

"We were getting old," explains Roger Champagne, who began working at Champs (a "1926 Worcester car") in 1939 as a teenager. He ran the business with his brother, Gerard, after their father hung up his apron.

Champagne, 88, who attended a June 2008 Culinary Arts Museum screening of *The History of New England Diners*, says he is pleased that Champs has not been demolished.

The diner was moved and now sits in a development on Woonsocket's Front Street; its original kitchen equipment is intact, and awaits a new owner.

The New England diner story continues, as diners adapt to changes in the culture at large. Comfort foods such as quesadillas have joined the standbys of cheeseburgers, meatloaf, and chowder. Still, the essential character of the diner, an unpretentious neighborhood restaurant with a personal touch, remains intact.

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