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More than just breakfast: 4 historic Rhode Island diners you have to try

Gail Ciampa The Providence Journal

Published 5:03 a.m. ET Nov. 19, 2021 | Updated 3:37 p.m. ET Nov. 22, 2021

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Diner owner cooks free hot meals for his community
Diner owner Ken Bethege is gathering food donations from his local community and using them to cook for anyone who needs a hot meal. *Humankind, USA TODAY*

When Pawtucket's Miss Lorraine Diner was named to the National Register of Historic Places, it became the fifth diner so designated in Rhode Island. How cool is that?

Historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation on the federal government's official list of properties throughout the United States.

Diners bring people in with their nostalgia and comfort food. But they also bring an artistic delight with unique designs in streamlined parlor cars.

Rhode Island's other historic diners are the Modern Diner (built in 1940) in Pawtucket, the West Side Diner (1947) in Providence and Jigger's Diner (1950) in East Greenwich.

The Miss Lorraine Diner, at 560 Mineral Spring Ave. in Pawtucket, fronts Lorraine Mills, a building that houses many food and drink artisans. *Sandor Bodo/The Providence Journal, File*

The fifth one is the Central Diner (1947) in Providence. It is currently vacant after operating, and closing, as The Liberty Elm and Elmwood Diner.

Here's a guide to each of the four diners that welcome guests with style.

Miss Lorraine Diner in Pawtucket

560 Mineral Spring Ave., Pawtucket, (401) 560-8686, misslorrainediner.com, open Monday to Saturday 6 a.m. to 2 p.m. and Sunday 7 a.m. to 2 p.m.

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The Miss Lorraine is a rare 1941 semi-streamline diner from the Worcester Lunch Car Company that opened as Donwell's Diner in Hartford, Connecticut. It moved twice in the state, to Kensington and then to Middletown in 1969, where it was Squeak's Diner. It sat vacant after it closed in 1997 and even after being purchased in 2003 by Colin Strayer, a filmmaker, preservationist and diner buff.

Miss Lorraine's Diner in Pawtucket was named to the National Register of Historic Places. *Courtesy State Of Rhode Island Historical Preservation And Heritage Commission*

Enter Jonathan Savage, owner and developer of Lorraine Mills. He bought the diner in 2011 and brought it to Pawtucket. It was the ultimate restoration project, taking more than a decade, with Joe Pacheco heading up the construction part.

Mike Arena is the operator of the diner. His menu is on the smaller side but full of comfort food for breakfast, including omelets, Benedicts and waffles. You will also find specials, such as cinnamon bun pancakes and vanilla custard French toast.

Celebrity sightings in Rhode Island: When stars come to dine

Lunch offers the Lorraine Burger, meatloaf, steak tips, shepherd's pie and beer-battered fish & chips. There are also sandwiches, such as grilled cheese, and a few Italian entrees, including chicken Parmesan. They have a liquor license and serve specialty cocktails for Sunday brunch. You can sit at the counter or in a booth or in the big dining room in the mill building.

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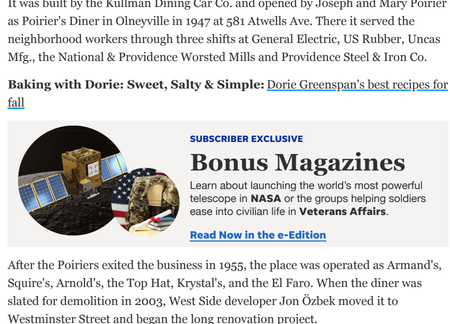
West Side Diner in Providence

1380 Westminster St., Providence, (401) 490-0644, westsidedinerri.com, open Monday through Saturday 6 a.m. to 2 p.m., and Sunday 7 a.m. to 2 p.m.

With curved windows of ribbed glass blocks, lots of stainless steel inside and out and an old-fashioned counter that runs the length of the interior, West Side Diner is really a monument to the art form of the diner.


The West Side Diner, built in 1947, opened as Poirier's Diner in Olneyville before moving to 380 Westminster St. *Bob Breidenbach/The Providence Journal File*

It was built by the Kullman Dining Car Co. and opened by Joseph and Mary Poirier as Poirier's Diner in Olneyville in 1947 at 581 Atwells Ave. There it served the neighborhood workers through three shifts at General Electric, US Rubber, Uncas Mfg., the National & Providence Worsted Mills and Providence Steel & Iron Co.

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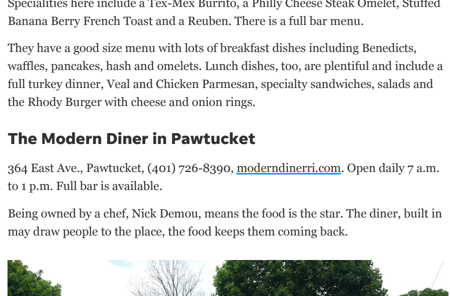
After the Poiriers exited the business in 1955, the place was operated as Armand's, Squire's, Arnold's, the Top Hat, Krystal's, and the El Faro. When the diner was slated for demolition in 2003, West Side developer Jon Özbek moved it to Westminster Street and began the long renovation project.

By 2012, the diner was ready for guests and in stepped Mike Arena and David Penta. They built a new room on the back that seats 40.


The interior of West Side Diner, in Providence. *Bob Breidenbach/The Providence Journal File*

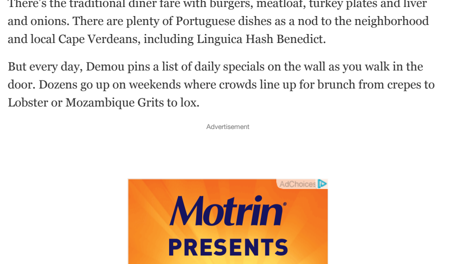
Specialities here include a Tex-Mex Burrito, a Philly Cheese Steak Omelet, Stuffed Banana Berry French Toast and a Reuben. There is a full bar menu.

They have a good size menu with lots of breakfast dishes including Benedicts, waffles, pancakes, hash and omelets. Lunch dishes, too, are plentiful and include a full turkey dinner, Veal and Chicken Parmesan, specialty sandwiches, salads and the Rhody Burger with cheese and onion rings.

The Modern Diner in Pawtucket

364 East Ave., Pawtucket, (401) 726-8390, moderndinerri.com. Open daily 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. Full bar is available.

Being owned by a chef, Nick Demou, means the food is the star. The diner, built in may draw people to the place, the food keeps them coming back.



The Modern Diner, owned by Nick Demou, has reopened in Pawtucket for takeout and limited indoor seating. *The Providence Journal, File / Bob Breidenbach*

There's the traditional diner fare with burgers, meatloaf, turkey plates and liver and onions. There are plenty of Portuguese dishes as a nod to the neighborhood and local Cape Verdeans, including Linguica Hash Benedict.

But every day, Demou pins a list of daily specials on the wall as you walk in the door. Dozens go up on weekends where crowds line up for brunch from crepes to Lobster or Mozambique Grits to lox.

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Always on the menu is the Custard French Toast which was named best diner dish on The Food Network. Made with thick Texas toast sitting on creamy custard, it's topped with house-candied pecans for some crunch and then fresh strawberries, blueberries, sliced kiwi and raspberry syrup that puts it over the top.

The Modern Diner is a Sterling Streamliner. Demou and his late father Arthur bought the diner from the City of Pawtucket and moved it in 1986. Because of its shape, customers believe his diner once ran on train tracks because it resembles a locomotive.

Jigger's Diner in East Greenwich

145 Main St., (401) 884-6060, jiggersdiner.com. Open from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. every day except Tuesday.

Jigger's sits on busy Main Street in East Greenwich in an old-style diner car. The small, domed building which was manufactured by the Worcester Lunch Car Co. in about 1947.

Sherwood's Diner, Worcester Lunch Car No. 755, arrives at Polar Park in Worcester

According to local history, there has been a "Jigger's" eatery at 145 Main St. since about 1917, with the dining car arriving in East Greenwich around 1950. The business waxed and waned, and closed occasionally.

It was brought back to life in 1992. All that remained of the original diner were the clock, the green stools, the woodwork, and tiles on the floors and walls when restored by Carol Shriner. She brought in booths from the Colonial Diner in Brockton. A decorative stainless steel hood was fabricated to match the old photographs of the original interior.

These days it's run by chef/owner Karie Myers.

She's continuing the history of serving a menu that's been described as a bit gourmet. Think Salmon Florentine Omelet, Lemon Ricotta or French Apple Stuffed French Toast and Gingerbread pancakes.

Jigger's Diner is a little gem on Main Street in East Greenwich. *Bob Thayer/The Providence Journal, File*

In fact, they promote their farm to table menu and list all the farms and fishermen from which they buy.

They also offer lighter fare with egg white omelets and an oatmeal platter.

But you can still get a coffee cabinet here. They serve jonnycakes made with Kenyon's Stone Ground Corn Meal. They have bagels and lox, too.

Lunch dishes include chili and the chowder of the day and a Seafood Salad Plate. Fresh pressed burgers include a veggie eggplant. There are fresh wraps and torpedo sandwiches or panini and a chicken tender plate.

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