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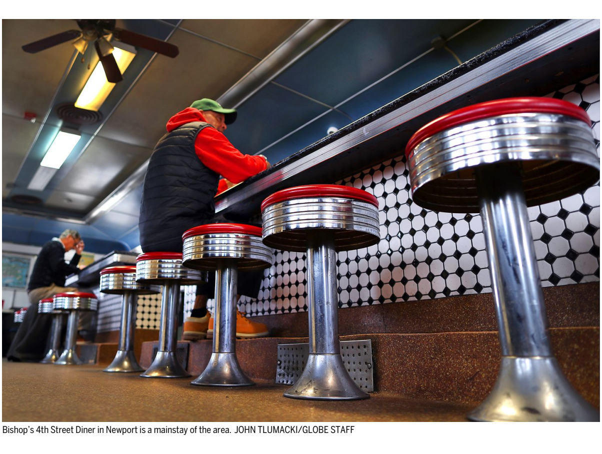
RI FOOD & DINING

Classic diners are Rhode Island's little-known legacy

From the heart of Providence's industrial port or the West Side, to Pawtucket, East Greenwich, North Kingstown and Newport, you could tour the Ocean State by exploring its diners

By Amanda Milkovits Globe Staff, Updated June 11, 2022, 4:08 p.m.


Bishop's 4th Street Diner in Newport is a mainstay of the area. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Be proud, Rhode Island: The iconic diner legacy began here 150 years ago, when a man named Walter Scott saw opportunity in the hungry workers on the overnight shifts. Scott hooked up a horse-drawn lunch wagon and fed the night owls, including workers hustling to get the newspapers out in the morning.

The manufactured lunch wagon gave way to prefabricated immobile restaurants that still carried the look of mobility. One manufacturer, Patrick J. Tierney, dubbed the longer wagons by the railroad term for cars, "diners," a name that has stuck for the last century.

If you've been craving human connection, head to an old-school diner. You can walk in alone, but there's something about a diner that won't let you be lonely.

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Here are seven great Rhode Island diners to try.

Do you know where the iconic Seaplane Diner gets its name? AMANDA MILKOVITS/GLOBE STAFF

THE SEAPLANE DINER

You can't miss the large model seaplane on the roof of this diner, in a nod to a former seaplane port that sat across Allens Avenue decades ago.

Step inside this 1950 double-wide diner made by the Jerry O'Mahony company of Elizabeth, New Jersey, and you're greeted by a cheerful blue and yellow interior, where the lengthy menu includes pages of handwritten specials. This is one of just 2,000 roadside diners made by the O'Mahony company from 1917 to 1952 (Bishops 4th Street Diner in Newport is another), and the waitresses will proudly point out the metal plaque over the door, that reads: "In our line we lead the world."

Decades ago, the little diner was moved down from Woonsocket to this spot in the heart of Providence's gritty industrial port, and during the busy hours, you'll sit elbow to elbow with truckers, locals, travelers, and workers getting off their shifts at the nearby hospitals. It's co-owned by David Penta and Michael Arena, who also own the West Side Diner in Providence, and non-diner eateries, Amanda's Kitchen in Pawtucket and the Lighthouse Restaurant in Johnston.

You can get breakfast all day at the Seaplane Diner, or Greek and Italian specials like the Bolognese pasta. AMANDA MILKOVITS

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Besides breakfast all day and eggs any way you can imagine, the Seaplane also offers seafood and Italian specials. One a chilly late spring morning, the waitress recommended the homemade penne Bolognese ($10.95). The thick meat sauce was delicious and the perfect antidote to the mist coming off the Providence River.

307 Allens Ave. in Providence, 401-941-9547, facebook.com/seaplanediner

At the West Side Diner in Providence, there's overflow seating in the back, but find a place inside the original diner if you can. AMANDA MILKOVITS/GLOBE STAFF

WEST SIDE DINER

This historic diner with its retro neon sign may appear as if it's always been part of the West Side neighborhood, but it took a decade and investment to bring the Streamline Art Deco diner back to its glory.

The 1947 diner, built by the Kullman Dining Car Company in Harrison, New Jersey, had been a fixture Eagle Square where it fed the workers in the surrounding industrial complexes. Over the next 60 or so years, the diner changed hands and changed names: Poirier's, Armand's, Krystal's, the Top Hat, Arnold's, and El Faro.

But plans to develop Eagle Square meant the diner was in danger of being demolished. West Side developer Jon Özbek stepped in with plans to move the diner and restore it, and it reopened in its current location in 2013.

There's a room added to the back of the diner for the overflow seating, especially on weekends, but find a place inside the original diner if you can.

Come for the history — the West Side Diner was the second in Rhode Island to be individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places — and stay for the food and banter. No one is shy here.

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Specials include blueberry walnut pancakes, waffle sundaes, and for lunch, the 8 ounce Rhody burger and Rueben. Try the Fall River omelet, featuring linguica, sautéed peppers, onions, tomatoes and cheddar jack cheese, or the Federal Hill, with sliced Italian sausage, roasted red peppers, sautéed onions and provolone cheese, both priced at $9.59. Breakfast is served until 11:30.

1380 Westminster St. in Providence, 401-490-0644, westsidedinerri.com

It's the dawn of another day in Pawtucket's East Side, and the Modern Diner already has the coffee on. DAVID LYON

MODERN DINER

This is the OG, the first diner in the country to be registered in the National Register of Historic Places, and is now believed to be the only Sterling Streamliner still in operation. The maroon and tan diner, built in 1941 by the J. B. Judkins Company of Merrimac, Massachusetts, looks like it zoomed off a railroad track onto this spot on East Avenue.

It used to be on Dexter Street, until owner Nick Demou and his late father Arthur bought the diner from the city of Pawtucket and moved it in 1986. Demou and his brother-in-law Frank Aguiar are still running the diner and coming up with the specials that make the restaurant famous.

Inside the Modern Diner in Pawtucket, the first diner to be registered in the National Register of Historic Places, where the custard French toast is a specialty. AMANDA MILKOVITS

The menu is thick with possibilities, and there are always lists of specials tacked floor to ceiling in the entry way. But breakfast lovers should go with the classic custard French toast, topped with fresh strawberries, blueberries, sliced kiwi, house-candied pecans and raspberry syrup, for $9.95.

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This was a happy accident for Demou, who invented the dish while looking for a way to use up vanilla pudding. In 2015, the Food Network's "Top 5 Restaurants" chose the Modern Diner's custard French toast as number 1 of Top 5 Diner Dishes in America.

364 East Ave. in Pawtucket, 401-726-8390, moderndinerri.com

Built in Worcester and stored in Connecticut, the restored Miss Lorraine Diner opened in Pawtucket in 2020. AMANDA MILKOVITS

MISS LORRAINE

Thank Worcester for this gem of a diner at the Lorraine Mills Complex.

The Miss Lorraine is one of a few "semi-streamliner" diners built by the Worcester Lunch Car Company, and its painstaking restoration earned the 1941 diner a spot on the National Register of Historic Places and a Rhody Award for Historic Preservation from the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission and Preserve Rhode Island.

Owner Jonathan Savage bought the diner in 2011 and moved it from a storage yard in Connecticut to Pawtucket, where it opened for business in 2020, under proprietor Mike Arena.

Find a stool along the pink Tennessee marble countertop or slide into one of the booths along the wall. A back entrance leads directly into a large dining area inside the mill building for crowds. The menu is all breakfast dishes and lunch comfort food. Try these homemade diner-style meals: meatloaf with gravy and mashed potatoes, and Miss Lorraine's Shepherd's Pie with braised short rib, both for $10.99.

560 Mineral Spring Ave. in Pawtucket, 401-560-8686, misslorrainediner.com

A meal at the Miss Lorraine Diner in Pawtucket. AMANDA MILKOVITS

Jigger's, in East Greenwich, has been a source of sustenance for more than a century. AMANDA MILKOVITS

JIGGER'S DINER

The business dates back to 1917, when the original owner Vilgot "Jigger" Lindberg opened a lunch cart here. The lunch cart was eventually replaced by a diner in the 1920s, and then in 1950, this lunch car built by Worcester was rolled into its narrow spot between boutiques on Main Street.

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Except for a decade or so in the 1980s, when it was used for storage by a nearby paint store, this has always been a diner. It was restored to its original glory in the early 1990s, with mahogany trim and booths, which came from the Colonial Diner in Brockton, Massachusetts.

Breakfast at Jigger's Diner in East Greenwich. AMANDA MILKOVITS

Admire the cozy interior while you peruse the award-winning menu, with its farm-to-table dishes. Along with comfort food, Jigger's features Rhode Island classics: lobster Benedicts and lobster rolls, johnny cakes, and chowder, as well as ice cream floats, made with local Yacht Club sodas, and ice cream cabinets.

Owner Karie Myers won a cook-off on "The Talk" in April with her johnny cakes special, which included avocado, sausage, and Hollandaise sauce. Try them for yourself: the johnny cake combo, with two eggs, fruit, bacon or sausage for $14.99 will fill you up and make you happy.

145 Main St. in East Greenwich, 401-884-6060, jiggersdiner.com

An omelet on the flatgrill at Bishop's 4th Street Diner in Newport, where the prices haven't changed. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

BISHOP'S 4th STREET DINER

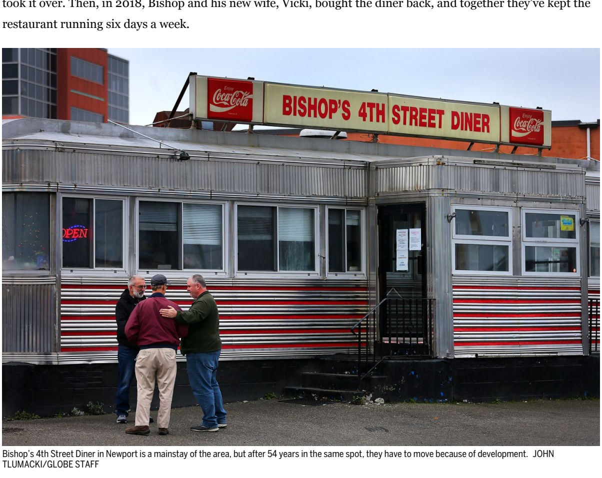
Dine here before it's gone. After 54 years, this mainstay will be closing on Aug. 14 and looking for a new home.

Like the Seaplane Diner, Bishop's is also a historic diner made by O'Mahony, and among just 20 left in the country. However, the diner's new landlord, Colbea Enterprises LLC, is developing the adjoining property and the land that Bishop's sits on to put up a new Seasons Market and gas station, which means the diner has to be removed by Sept. 1.

Owners Steve and Vicki Bishop can't afford to move the diner, so they've listed it for sale, hoping that someone else will give it a new home, or even use it for parts. The diner is now listed at $135,000, but Bishop says that's negotiable.

It pains them to have to say goodbye. "These last couple of months are definitely going to be sad," Bishop said. The customers "are sometimes somber, because they know it's coming to an end."

Bishop first bought the diner in 1998, giving it his last name, and ran it for a decade until 2008 when his ex-wife took it over. Then, in 2018, Bishop and his new wife, Vicki, bought the diner back, and together they've kept the restaurant running six days a week.



Bishop's 4th Street Diner in Newport is a mainstay of the area, but after 54 years in the same spot, they have to move because of development. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

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The menu is extensive, just like a diner menu should be, but Bishop is particularly proud of the homemade chourico hash and the fresh turkey sandwiches and turkey dinner, with homemade mashed potatoes.

They lowered prices after they bought the diner, and Bishop points out that the prices haven't changed, even though the costs for everything else has gone up. They have survived rising gas prices, food prices, and a pandemic, but there's little they can do when the land under the diner is beyond their control.

"We're not here to make a billion dollars. We're here to support our staff and make people happy," Bishop said. "And it's all coming to an end."

184 Admiral Kalfbus Road in Newport, 401-847-2069, facebook.com/Bishops.

Matthew Tortolano works the counter, while his father, Anthony, cooks up the orders in the kitchen at Snoopy's Diner in North Kingstown. AMANDA MILKOVITS/GLOBE STAFF

SNOOPY'S DINER

This immaculate little diner, made in 1941 by the Silk City Diner Company in Paterson, N.J., has been a family operation for more than a half-century.

Generations of the appropriately named Bacon family had owned and operated the roadside diner for over 50 years. Then, last summer, they sold the diner to a new family.

Since December, Anthony Tortolano and his 20-year-old son Matthew are the running the business together. Matthew is the front man, taking care of customers, while his father stays in the kitchen and cooks.

Since it's just the two of them, the menu is simple: Eggs every which way for breakfast, and hot and cold sandwiches, as well as the popular hot wieners, aka "Biggest Wiener in Town." The meals are served in carry-out containers, like a deli, but customers can stick around at the tables or the counter stools.

Matthew will recommend the shaved steak sandwich ($10), the Italian grinder ($10), and the wieners ($2.50) loaded with meat sauce. The fries are handcut and perfectly crispy and salty. They buy from local purveyors, including Buono's Bakery in Providence, coffee from Mills Coffee in Providence, and Little Rhody Brand Frankfurts in Johnston.

Anthony had been in the automobile business for 36 years, so this is a new path, and Matthew admitted it wasn't what he expected to do.

But already he has the knack for working in a diner — he's attentive, quick on his feet, friendly and chatty with people.

"I like to talk to customers," Matthew said. "It's fun to watch — everybody knows somebody who walks in here."

One of the counter-mounted Seeburg Wall-O-Matic 200 jukeboxes, loaded with oldies. Meals at Snoopy's are served in carry-out containers, like a deli, but customers can stick around and eat at the counter or at tables. AMANDA MILKOVITS/GLOBE STAFF

So, here he is, in a diner built decades before he was born, a new generation serving travelers along this busy route.

They have the blessing from the Bacons, whose farewell note was made into a sign that hangs over the coffee pots:

"The past 50+ years have been an absolute pleasure, watching families grow and make memories with full bellies and happy hearts, from one generation to the next. ... All we ask is that you welcome this wonderful new family of owners with open arms and give them all of the love, admiration, and support you've shown our small family-owned business over the years."

4001 Quaker Lane in North Kingstown, 401-295-1533, snoopysdiner.com

Snoopy's Diner in North Kingstown. AMANDA MILKOVITS/GLOBE STAFF

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The Jan. 6 committee is convening Monday for its second public hearing. Follow along for the latest news, updates, and analyses.

Two more Massachusetts men test positive for monkeypox virus
Two more Massachusetts men have tested positive for the monkeypox virus, nearly a month after the state's first case of the virus was reported amid an international outbreak, the Department of Public Health said Sunday. The tests came back positive on Saturday.

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Donald Trump's closest campaign advisers, top government officials, and even his family were dismantling his false claims of 2020 voting fraud on election night, several said.

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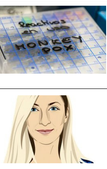
I have always kept a very open mind to dating around age, race/ethnicity, professional background, geographic distance, etc., but I sense that I might just be better off taking a break from dating for a few years and picking up again in my mid-30s.



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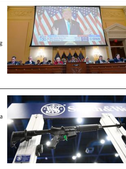

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