

Counter culture

With a mix of home-style meals, consistent decor and mom-and-pop charm, the diner has retained a dedicated following, even among fierce competition

By M. SHARON BAKER

Much like the “bottomless” cups of coffee at classic diners that dot highways and towns across the country, Americans’ love for the iconic restaurant concept never seems to run out.

Through the years, the countless diners along highway exits and towns throughout the country have fended off competition from chains and outlasted fleeting culinary fads with a simple formula: a predictable format, speedy service and a menu of familiar favorites.

“This little slice of the foodservice business has survived ... and always will survive by being the changing face of home-style cooking,” says Richard Gutman, executive director of the Culinary Arts museum at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, R.I. “Diners serve the food people want to eat.”

Before taking on the executive director role, Gutman, author of several books on diners, served as guest curator for a permanent exhibit dedicated to the 100-year-old concept, called “Still Cooking in the 21st Century.” It features a replica lunch counter and various other collectibles.

The American icon has such timeless appeal, in fact, that it has recently been the focus of study and celebration. Countless books have been written on the subject, and The Food Network debuted a television show called “Diners, Drive-ins and Dives” last year.

But despite the diner’s unwavering appeal, day-to-day operations are hardly without challenges.

Randy Garbin, author of the book “Diners of New England,” the Roadside Online blog and a diner fan who has eaten through 650 of his 1,000-diner goal, regularly fields calls from people seeking to renovate and open old diners.

“I can usually tell within 10 minutes if they have any success in the business,” Garbin says.

Many aren’t aware of the \$1 million or so they’ll have to spend moving, renovating and complying with recent building codes. The Americans with Disabilities Act al-

most made every diner built before World War II obsolete, as the small structures typically lack a lot of space between the counter and booths, he said. Most have no idea what it takes to survive in a hyper-competitive restaurant environment with big chains, he adds.

“It’s getting impossible to run a profitable 60-seat classical diner” for those reasons, Garbin says.

As a result, some diners attempt to change with the times without straying from their simple, successful formula, says Gutman of the Culinary Arts museum.

He cites The Liberty Elm, located not far from the museum in Providence, a 1947 Worcester Lunch Car diner serving healthy comfort food and robust coffee.

“The little diner sat dormant for a long time, and now they’re serving fresh foods often made with the ingredients from the farmers market,” he says. “They’re offering free Wi-Fi and offering locally made sodas from local bottlers. They are buying the right kind of coffee, and the food is great.”

Because the segment is largely dominated by mom-and-pop operations, the diner experience is often driven by the character and charm of the owners, most of whom can be found on the premises each day, slinging hash in the kitchen or refilling coffee cups. But even as locations, owners and appearances vary widely, a



PHOTOS: BRIAN BUTKO

Left: Classic diners, such as Peppi's Diner in Pittsburgh, which has had several names and owners in its 60 years, remain American favorites.

Below: Successful diner chains are rare, but 17-unit Silver Diner has plans to expand its brand.



diner is rarely hard to spot.

“Diners have a perfect formula going for them,” says Brian Butko, who has authored a small library about the roadside experiences of the Lincoln Highway and a book called Diners of Pennsylvania. “They have a basic look whatever the age or manufacturer, stools at a counter, a booth, and a menu that includes home-cooked food.”

“If you travel and see a diner, you know what to expect yet every single one varies somewhat. They have completely different styles of food on the menu, yet you can tell they are a diner.”

Only a handful of “diner” chains exist, and a number of larger companies, notably Denny’s Corp., have unsuccessfully tried to capitalize on the diner’s appeal. The Spartanburg, S.C.-based company in 1997 introduced a retro Denny’s Classic Diner concept, complete with classic touches of neon and chrome, with big plans to expand the format throughout its namesake chain.

The initiative was scrapped several years later, however.

“Denny’s attempt was a fiasco,” Gutman says. “It is interesting that they felt the need to clothe some of their restaurants in a diner guise, but they didn’t fool too many people, and they certainly didn’t turn them into diners.”

“The diner formula relies on having the owner on site and knowing the customers,” he adds, and that just doesn’t seem to go together with a chain.

Some companies have had more success translating the diner feel to a larger audience.

Johnny Rockets, founded in 1986, has grown to 188 units that sport a retro look, serve classic American fare and feature dancing servers. The California-based chain struggled during the economic downturn in the 1990s as consumers flocked to the dizzy array of other eateries. Executives lost sight of the basics, focusing solely on growth, and costs spiraled out of control, according to reports.

But a new team has revamped the chain’s internal structure and loosened the reins on franchising, which it had halted for a time while the team regrouped.

Silver Diner, a chain of 17 units, is now in expansion mode as part of a partnership with Creative Host. Bob Giaimo co-founded The Silver Diner in 1989 in Rockville, Md., to provide a home-style option for baby boomers looking for a casual alternative to fast food.

Giaimo is adapting with the times by moving the Silver Diner within reach of busy travelers looking for better airport fare. The first airport location opened two months ago in Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall airport and is on track to be a \$5 million operation, Giaimo said.

“Our flagship location in Rockville does about \$5.5 million, to put that in perspective,” he says.

Silver Diner also plans to unveil a third concept that puts them squarely in the fast-casual market with a Metro version that fits into shopping centers with a smaller footprint than freestanding units.

“We’re positioning the diner for the next generation,” Giaimo says. “Our Classic [version] is still the bread and butter of our business, but ultimately we’ll be opening up multiple Metros and airports. There aren’t that many \$5 million airport restaurants and we expect the rapid expansion of Metro.”

Even as modern challenges and changing tastes continue to challenge diner operators, they can continue to rely on the fact that their basic premise never goes out of style.

“One of the diner’s hallmarks is food and plenty of it at a great price,” he says.

That’s something everyone always appreciates. ■