



by Randy Garbin
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When I think of the more colorful facets of diner history, I recall the more testosterone-filled atmospheres, where hard-working men drop in for big, heavy meals, with a side of smart-ass bantering, simmering in a cauldron of good-natured, macho posturing. Grillmen with names like “Mack” or “Chickie” calmly and professionally process dozens of orders an hour to guys hungry and in a rush to get back to work. If a female is to be found at all, she’s behind the counter talking as tough or tougher than her clientele. In other words, any typical day at the Bayway Diner.

Now that diners have grown huge and big menus feature every dish ever made, a nine-seat gem like the Bayway Diner in Linden, New Jersey, pries open a portal into this increasingly rarified atmosphere. While most of us regard it a good thing that we’ve long ago welcomed the fairer sex into our favorite restaurant, let’s face it: A family-friendly diner hardly inspires a whole lot of diner lore. For instance, the movie “Diner” is predicated on the impulsive and puerile behavior of a group of guys set free from the civilizing effects that women will soon impose on their lives. While in the diner, Eddie, Fen, Boogie, Shrevie, Modell, and Billy keep adulthood at bay for one more night.

It’s not that the Bayway doesn’t welcome women, but this little diner happens to sit at the entrance to one of the largest oil-tank farms on the East Coast, and so it sees a steady stream of rumbling semi-trailer tankers at all times of the day, vehicles that are inevitably piloted by brawny guys with big appetites. They work hard, talk tough, and eat heavy.

Owner Mike Giunta could easily change places with them. Mike works as a fireman for the City of Newark, builds houses, sports sprawling tattoos on his arms, and rides a Harley. He originally purchased the former White Crown Diner with the idea of knocking it down to make way for a truck garage. When word of his plans got out locally, there was a huge outcry. The White Crown, though shuttered for months, once packed them in and still had a loyal following.

Comac built this tiny, wood-framed building in the late 1940s as an entry-level model. The diner

started at a location near Linden's center. A Kullman renovation in 1961 gave it a space-age flared roofline and some new interior laminates, but left intact the original porcelain panels. When Mike purchased the property, time and heavy use had worn down and discolored all the original and renovated features. Repeated cleanings had even nearly wiped clean the Comac tag, still affixed above the entryway.

Since Comac used mainly low-cost materials for the interior to keep the price down, this project actually presented an opportunity to improve upon the original design. The renovators replaced cheap faux tile Masonite on the walls with heavy-duty, wood-grained Formica, in a timeless color palate of light gray, off-white, and red-orange for the trim. The utilitarian black coin-tile floor gave way to a more classic and durable ceramic tile. For the countertop, customers rest their mugs on a decidedly-diner boomerang pattern on a charcoal background.

The job would actually remove one of the stools to make room for a more efficient take-out business — a wise move given that to-go orders account for at least 80 percent of the Bayway's receipts. With a fresh, streamlined look that respects diner traditions, the diner opened the day after Christmas, 2005. So far, the enthusiastic response to the new enterprise has pleasantly surprised the owner.

"I never worked in a restaurant a day in my life," Mike admits. "Now, we get guys who come in here for three meals a day, every day!" He gives much of the credit to his counter crew, led by Joe "The Cook," and Juan, who does the prep in the diner's cramped but immaculate basement.

For its size, the Bayway offers a surprisingly extensive menu of everything from full pancake breakfasts to a dish Mike describes proudly: a Cajun chicken salad on tri-colored pasta — fancy fare for this no-nonsense joint. The lunch specials include a "super double Italian hot dog," and after only six months can claim its grilled marinated chicken on pita "famous." We recommend the grilled sausage-and-peppers sub, a boldly spiced delight of a sandwich. Served with a pile of fries, pickle, and homemade coleslaw, it provides ample fuel for an afternoon of hard work.

Mike notes with great pride the facts and figures generated by this little enterprise. Eight to ten cases of fries and 90 dozen eggs are used every week. The coffee consumption continues to amaze his supplier. "I got guys calling me up and ordering six or seven omelets at a pop," he says.

The diner's hours of 5-to-5 on weekdays are designed to get the guys coming and going. "In the morning, you see the trucks lined up all down the road," he says as he points down the length of South Wood Avenue. "Then I get 'em for lunch, and at 3 o'clock at the end of their shift, I get 'em before they go home!" Obviously, someone knew a good location when they saw it. The recent addition of Saturday hours have brought in business from the neighborhood — so obviously the diner welcomes all.

Mike asks, "J'eat yet?" It's a Jersey expression that welcomes you to the counter, where one of the nine stools will open up before you know it. Here anyone can be one of the guys and everyone gets their hunger roughed up.