



ORDER UP!

A Merrimack Valley Diner Tour

by **Susan Nye**

photos by **Kevin Harkins**

hair & makeup by

April Graffeo & Jos'e Batistine,
co-owners **Indra Salon**
- **Andover, MA**

Lauren Belanger model

shot on location at

Pat's Diner in Salisbury

The Lone Ranger was hardly alone; he traveled with his steadfast companion, Tonto. Louise was paired up with Thelma on her girls' weekend gone bad. And me? Well, for my latest road trip, a tour of Merrimack Valley diners, I took my 82-year-old father. Dad is a likeable sort with a gift for gab. As sidekicks go, he's a pretty good bet. We spent a snowy Saturday meandering through the Merrimack Valley getting a taste for the caffeine and camaraderie of the region's neighborhood diners.



FIRST STOP: THE MANCHESTER DINER.

Four years ago, Virginia Swanson bought a little hole in the wall on Hanover Street and opened the Manchester Diner. She is now busy seven days a week feeding people from the neighborhood, downtown office workers and, on weekends, Manchester's night owls.

When we asked about her specialty – her claim to fame – Virginia promptly replied, "Everything's special." The diner only serves fresh food, never canned or frozen. When asked why people come to the Manchester Diner, our counter-mate didn't hesitate and proclaimed, "Because everything is delicious." Virginia smiled and sheepishly added, "Plus, I'm nice."

ON TO MARYANN'S IN DERRY.

First of all, there really is a MaryAnn. MaryAnn and Bill Andreoli have owned the diner for two decades. Their two kids, an old softball chum of MaryAnn's, and a staff of "whacked out" waitresses and cooks complete the cast of characters.

While everyone assured us it was a slow day, MaryAnn's was jumping. We snagged a couple of stools at the counter and managed a quick chat with employees Linda, Nancy and Hillary. All three ladies were filled with high energy and happy to share a few stories with us. We heard about some celebrity visits at the diner, including Chubby Checker, Rex Trailer and Bill Clinton. And the former President? According to Nancy, or maybe it was Hillary or Linda, "He's awesome! Just gorgeous."

We talked about the December ice storm. For several days the crew at MaryAnn's kept locals and dozens of exhausted utility workers fed. With the jukebox playing and the waitresses passing out huge plates of food and non-stop smiles, I have no doubt that MaryAnn's was a welcome refuge.



THEN ON TO ALICIA'S DINER IN PELHAM.

Tucked into a nondescript strip mall on Route 38, if you didn't know it was there, you'd probably miss it. Not to worry: Alicia's Diner has a loyal following, and every table was filled.

Dad and I chatted with one of the waitresses and a few customers. Tracy has been at the diner since Roger Chagnon, the owner and cook, opened it eight years ago. Between our questions, she ran around picking up and delivering huge breakfast platters and pouring endless refills. And she did it all with a warm, friendly smile. "People come here for the food," Tracy told us. "Roger serves a great breakfast: it's fast, there's lots of it, and the price is right." Seated on either side of us, longtime customers Frank and Kevin heartily agreed.



DOWN TO LOWELL AND THE COME DINNER.

A family affair, the Conants have owned and operated the diner on Lakeview Avenue for almost three decades. The Cameo Diner is well known for its hearty breakfasts, and the neighborhood was bereft when the Conant family took a six-month break last year. Back in business again, Scott Jr. and his wife Jenn have taken over the establishment.

When they were young, all four Conant kids worked there. Scott's sister Michelle still waits tables. In spite of his "retirement," Scott Sr. continues to man the grill. The diner has built its great reputation on cooking everything to order. The bacon and eggs are always fresh, never precooked. In the words of Scott Sr., "It might take a few minutes longer, but it's worth it."



AND OVER TO LAWRENCE AND THE SUNNYSIDE DINER.

The Sunnyside Diner is an all-American melting pot. On top of its traditional breakfast and lunch menu, the Sunnyside offers Spanish and Mediterranean specialties. It's also a bit of a United Nations, so feel free to place your order in English, French, Arabic or Spanish.

Built in 1928, it has changed names and owners several times. Samer Geha bought the diner in 2006. Part cook and part entertainer, Sam is a one-man show behind the grill. The Sunnyside has lots of regular customers and many, particularly retirees, arrive like clockwork at the same time every day. "They don't have to give us their order," Sam comments. "As soon as I see them come in the door, I know what they want and start to cook their breakfast."



Want to take your own tour?
Here are the stops we hit - tell 'em
Merrimack Valley Magazine sent
you.



Manchester Diner

Owner: Virginia Swanson
 119 Hanover Street, Manchester
 (603) 669-8928
 www.manchesterdiner.com

MaryAnn's

Owners: Bill & MaryAnn Andreoli
 29 East Broadway, Derry
 (603) 434-5785
 www.maryannsiner.com

Alicia's Diner

Owner: Roger Chagnon
 116 Bridge Street, Pelham
 (603) 635-0992

Cameo Diner

Owners: Scott and Jenn Conant
 715 Lakeview Avenue, Lowell
 (978) 452-3724

Sunnyside Diner

Owner: Samer Geha
 639 Broadway, Lawrence
 (978) 687-9595

**Boxford Community
 Store and Eatery**

Owners: Wayne and Jane Merrill
 7 Elm Street, Boxford
 (978) 887-5632

Pat's Diner

Owner: Pat Archambault
 11 Bridge Road, Salisbury
 (978) 465-3060

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THEN EAST TO THE BOXFORD COMMUNITY STORE AND EATERY.

In all honesty, the Community Store probably doesn't qualify as a diner. While owners Jane and Wayne Merrill cook up lots of typical diner dishes, they also serve pizza. And it doubles as a convenience store, selling milk, eggs, a few staples and newspapers.

But the Store bustles with a mix of moms and kids, seniors, firefighters and a local business exec or two, all enjoying their meals. We sat at the counter chatting with our waitress, Carly, and one of the regulars who told us: "I've been coming here since 1978. I like the atmosphere. Wayne has good people working for him." Giving a nod to our young waitress, he added, "We watched them grow up."



AND FINALLY UP TO PAT'S DINER IN SALISBURY.

Pat's Diner is a jewel. The classic Worcester diner was custom-built in 1950. With its ancient ice box, chrome stools and juke box, the diner is a real piece of historic Americana.

Pat Poulakos Archambault bought her diner in 1999 to honor her late husband. Pat met the love of her life, her soul mate and a Sean Connery-look-alike, in a diner. They enjoyed 20-something years of wedded bliss, and after her husband's death, the heart-broken Pat bought the diner.

Pat has been in the restaurant business for decades. She summed up her philosophy for us: "When our customers come through that door, they are doing us a favor, and we must treat them like family." True to her heritage, Pat serves many Greek specialties along with typical diner fare. And true to her philosophy, she treated us like family. Like any good Greek mother, she sent us off with enough spanakopita, pastitsio and dolmades to last a week. As we headed out, loaded down with Greek goodies, Pat's final words were, "I love my diner."

It shows.

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