



The Unforgettable Maine from Roadside

The first thing that caught our eye about the Maine Diner was the sign. Understand, the diner is on a heavily-built-up section of Rte. 1, the scenic route up the coast of Maine. You have to pass through (or, if you are inclined, stop at) all the outlets of Kittery, and the quaint, touristy towns of York and Ogunquit before reaching the Wells town line. Lunch doesn't just beckon you along this stretch of road - it waves, hollers, and jumps up and down. By that I mean, there are dozens of roadside restaurants, all clamoring for your attention. Many of them trumpet their seafood specials, especially Maine lobster. Where to stop? How do you know whether one is better than another?

Then, there on the right, you see the Maine Diner's attractive red and blue sign: BREAKFAST ANYTIME (always a plus for a diner, in my opinion - ever had your heart set on pancakes only to be caught on the 11:30 A.M. cusp?). And, FAMILY PRICES, LOBSTER PIE, SURF N TURF. And, interestingly, OUR OWN PRODUCE SERVED.

The Maine Diner is set apart from its competition in many ways. First of all - and good enough for us - it's a diner in a sea of sometimes tacky tourist-trap restaurants. Well, technically it's an "on-site," as we say here at ROADSIDE, which means it fits the design and spirit of a true diner. It seats about 70, it has booths, a counter, stools, and some of the nicest waitresses we've ever had the pleasure to be waited on by. It is owned by brothers Myles and Dick Henry, young, energetic men who are obviously smart, creative, and have their hearts in the right place. We didn't get to meet Dick, but Myles couldn't have been nicer. And we watched him in action with his staff and with other customers and saw that he was everything the best diner operators are: personable, enthusiastic, and professional.

The food is truly wonderful at the Maine. The word "home-made" appears repeatedly on the menu: home-made baked beans, home-made chicken pot pie, home-made codfish cakes, etc. But we opted for the lobster pie, because the sign out front had tipped us off that it is the diner's specialty, and the menu pointed out that Cook's Magazine had once requested and printed the recipe. We were not disappointed. It was full of large, succulent chunks of fresh lobster, and the buttery bread-crumbs topping was especially tasty. Myles told us the secret. The crumbs are Ritz crackers mixed with tomalley from the lobster. His grandmother's recipe. As it turns out, most of the diner's dishes are her recipes. "She was an extraordinary cook," he said proudly.

The Maine Diner has been a Route 1 fixture for years, but it was formerly open only on an inverse seasonal basis. As soon as tourists started coming up the coast in the spring, the coot who owned it shut down until the winter, when the out-of-staters disappeared. Strictly local.

In fact, it was such a favorite of Bruce and Myles Henry of nearby Drake's Island, that when they saw it for sale, they bought it, spruced it up, painted the outside white with snappy blue trim, and went about perfecting their grandmother's lobster-pie recipe.

Of all the good downeast things you can eat at the Maine Diner, grandmother's luxury casserole is the one that mustn't be missed. Your individual ceramic dish contains whole big portions of lobster-tail, claw, knuckle meat-drenched in butter, topped with a mixture of breadcrumbs and tomalley. It is a strange, punk-colored dish, green and brown and pink, shock-ingly rich.

The menu describes the hot lobster roll as FANTASTIC! The menu is correct. It is a Connecticut-style roll, nothing but sweet, resilient lobster meat spilling out of a grilled weiner bun. You cannot eat it with your hands, because the bun is soaked with butter and falls apart under the weight of the meat. But you do eat it with your hands, and fingers glisten as they pick tender claws and strings of pink, and occasional hunks of butter-sopped bread.

Fried clams are extraordinary, too-vigorously oceanic, just a wee bit oily; so fragile the crust seems to melt away as you sink into them.

Maine Diner pies are literally homemade, brought and sold to the Henry brothers by the waitresses, whose specialties include red raspberry, blueberry, pistachio, and banana cream.

There is always grape-nut custard on the menu - a layered pudding, its eggy balm atop a bed of moistened cereal. This kindly nutmeg-dusted bowl of bliss is a true New England antique, reminiscent of a time before gourmets made dessert sinful and decadent.

Occasionally, the Henry brothers bake up a batch of pale Indian pudding, dotted with raisins. On this subject, our waitress couldn't help but volunteer a passionate opinion: "to me Indian pudding tastes like...yech!"

Other than that prejudice, the help at the Maine Diner is friendly and proud of the food. You could see them beam with joy as we happily plowed our way through one of the best inexpensive roadside meals along Maine's southern coast.

About the menu, Myles explains that they decided not to serve exactly the same food as all the other restaurants in the area, "we didn't want to get involved in twin-lobster price duels!" No steamers either. But the seafood lover will hardly be disappointed. If you manage to pass up the lobster pie, well, at least try the seafood chowder. It was hearty, creamy, and laden with juicy shrimp and scallops. It has repeatedly won the Best Chowder competition at the Ogunquit Chowderfest - and you have to imagine that that's a tough contest.

All this was topped off with fresh hot coffee and delicious raspberry pie.

So, we had our Rte. 1 tourist lunch, and with warm bellies and satisfied souls, decided to explore the diner and ask Myles some more questions.

We'd admired the tidy white and blue motif throughout - walls and trim, tables, stools, etc. - and weren't surprised to learn that they completely repaint every three years. But what about the carpeted floor, why not tile? He had a ready answer, or rather several: the carpet keeps down the noise level, which is important in a restaurant this popular and crowded; it prevents slipping, offering better footing for patrons and staff alike; and it's easier on his waitstaff's aching feet. Good answers, we had to admit. What about the 'we serve our own produce' claim? This really intrigued me, being a gardener myself. And thus we teamed an amazing bit of the diner's history. It seems that there had been a garden out back for many years, The original owner, a fellow named Socrates "Louie" Toton, had owned a diner in Boston in the 50's, the City Hall Lunch. The Maine Diner, smaller than it is now (the Henry brothers added a non-smoking dining room in 1988), was his retirement diner. Incredibly, Toton closed the diner during the summer months so he could work in his garden! I suppose I understood why when I saw all the open land behind the diner. But as a business move, his decision was downright crazy.

At any rate, the diner sat idle after it passed out of Toton's hands, in the early 80s, until the Henry brothers, Myles, Dick, and Bruce (who has since left it to the other two), took over. When they were pondering how to make the place stand out, they realized the now-fallow garden was an untapped resource, How many diners, or restaurants for that matter, have a big chunk of land out back? And 'the soil was real fertile,' Myles notes. So Bruce revived the garden, and their friend Dennis Shook has been helping them with it. It produces a range of summer vegetables - peas, tomatoes (some of which are made into sauce and frozen for later use), eggplants, green beans, summer squash. They get their seeds from that venerable Maine seed house, Johnny's Selected Seeds. So a summer-time meal at the Maine is very Maine.

Summer is obviously the diner's busiest time. In fact, Myles says they've had days where the kitchen is turning out one meal every 38 seconds. For those waiting in line, there are copies of the menu in the foyer and free coffee for anyone who wants it.

The dedicated waitstaff and kitchen help are able to cope because they are an efficient team, he explained. Many of them have been with the diner for years and are like family. And some are literally family - when our waitress Kathy went off duty, her daughter Carrie took over. Her brother Jeremy also works there. The fact that the Henry family offers health insurance and the 401K retirement plan shows their commitment to the staff in return - restaurants, particularly small ones, don't often do this.

With this kind of atmosphere, we were glad to learn that the Maine Diner is not just another summer-tourist outlet and is open year-round (save a mid-winter vacation week or two) - But how do they manage in the off-season? Myles explained that there are many regulars, who appreciate not just the dependable evening specials, but the fact that a restaurant stays open for them. The other area restaurants board up, or reduce their hours drastically. "The locals are our backbone," Myles said. And as Carrie told us, it's the regulars that make her job so enjoyable.

On our way out, we noticed some appreciative letters posted on the wall in the foyer. One fan had written: "it's wonderful to see a restaurant business that does everything right." We had to wonder if the writer knew the half of it. The Maine Diner serves tourists with style and efficiency, yet manages to take care of the locals. It retains all the hominess and comfort of the best diners, but can be consistent and handle high volume. The food is high-quality, fairly priced, and served by nice people. It thrives in an area where the competition is keen. "Our formula is simple," Myles said - and we might have thought him overly idealistic if we hadn't experienced the Maine Diner for ourselves - "we treat the customers like guests in our own home." Amazing, and true. -T.D.[The Maine Diner is located on Rte. 1 North (the last restaurant on the right before Kennebunk) in Wells, Maine. Hours are 7 A.M. to 8 P.M.; to 9 P.M. in the summer and on weekends.
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