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From lunch wagon to railroad car the humble diner is making a comeback

A true diner is a prefabricated structure built at an assembly site and transported to a permanent location for installation. But, decommissioned railroad cars and trolleys often were converted into diners. While most are single-unit independents, two chains wish to attract restaurateurs who look for a unique setting where they can bring back the past in a delicious and entertaining model.

By Lou Dzierzak

Diners—those shiny, stainless steel buildings shaped like a railroad car—have been a welcoming beacon for travelers on the back roads of America for decades.

Companies like Jerry's Curb Service, the 5 & Diner and Dinermite are responding to our nostalgia for the '50s with restaurant building designs and menus to take diners back to the past.

Based in Atlanta, Ga., Dinermite has been building diners since 1959. The company markets modular building systems to create a diner-style environment tailored to the operators' location and space requirements. The elements of a quintessential diner include a stainless steel exterior, black-and-white tiles

on the floor and red-and-white vinyl seats. A waitress named Flo or Betty comes extra.

Stainless steel was used on the exteriors in early construction. "It looked shiny, got attention and lasted longer. It had a street attraction. You looked at it and said I want to go into that place," Don Memberg, director of marketing for Dinermite said.

Ken Higginbotham, CEO and president of 5 & Diner in Phoenix, bought his first diner in 1989 and spent two years refining the concept.

"Our business approach is to provide a diner atmosphere that gives you the feeling that you've just stepped back into the '50s," Higginbotham said.

Franchise operators and patrons appreciate the feeling. "For a lot of people it's like going to a museum where they can eat. It was a relaxed era. In general, life in the '50s was pretty good. It was a time of expansion. A nice time in history that people like to remember," Higginbotham said.

Authenticity is important to the experience. "We are very exact in what we do. Right down to the uniforms. I've been in diners where you see girls in cutoffs and polo shirts they didn't have in the '50s. So we go right down to the dresses and all the ambiance inside. Our philosophy is to give them a true

'50s experience," Higginbotham said.

Jerry's Curb Service started in 1947. The chain, by the way, is taking credit for inventing the steak salad. As the story goes, a customer in the 1960s ordered a steak sandwich, hold the bun, add fries and salad dressing. Curious, the server tried the odd combination, with one exception, she placed her sliced steak and fries on a bed of lettuce before topping it with dressing. The dish is now a staple at the restaurant.

In November 2003, the company designed and built a prototype to start franchise operations. They're about to open their first franchise location in Greenville, S.C., and begin construction on another unit in Columbus, Ga., CEO Dave Guido said.

Guido and his team have created a concept that blends nostalgia for the past with state-of-the-art business technology. "We have a diner that caters to the curb. We didn't think the world needed another quick-service restaurant."

On the outside Jerry's features a retro look with revolving doors, stainless steel and neon. "Our register system utilizes Palm Pilots. So when a carhop comes out to your car they punch in your order and it is beamed into the kitchen and pantry. It allows us to have for phenomenal service times, even though all our food is cooked to order," Guido said.

It's gotta be the food

5 & Diner and Jerry's Curb Service provide franchisees with menus that

combine a variety of food with operational efficiency. In addition to offering the expected diner fare of hamburgers and fries, both companies build in flexibility to capture local tastes and preferences.

“Our menu is simple and small. We only use fresh ingredients. We like to keep the core menu simple. We have designed Jerry’s to be completely flexible. We have the ability to do just about anything out of that operation. We have blue-plate specials including creamed chicken and biscuits or meatloaf and mashed potatoes. As we continue to expand into different regions, we will keep our core offering and continue blue-plate specials that will reflect the flavors and trends in that region,” said Guido.

5 & Diner has received awards from Phoenix magazine, The Arizona Republic and the Zagat Survey for their food. “Our signature sandwiches are basic ’50s food restyled to make them a little more glamorous,” Higginbotham said.

Local flavor is also important. This summer 5 & Diner will open a franchise in Madison, Wis. “They like perch and walleye, two fish that we don’t serve anywhere else. Our chef will work with our vendors to find a good perch and walleye source, and experiment to come up with a recipe to cook that fish correctly,” said Higginbotham.

Unlike other restaurant franchises that specialize in a certain type of food, diners are known for variety. Many are open 24 hours and serve customers in three day parts. The range of food served draws customers from across all social and economic segments of society.

No set demographic

5 & Diner uses a pollster to conduct exit surveys. “We know the average age is 42, but the income range is across the board. Come to our store in Phoenix and you will see Porsches and Lamborghinis parked next to beat-up Chevrolets,” said Higginbotham.



Guido’s experience supports that observation. “Walking through our parking lot you see a cross section of life. Kids in their first car to Harley riders sitting on the curb enjoying a meal,” he said.

Both Jerry’s Curb Service and 5 & Diner offer prospective franchisees the opportunity to tap into that interest.

Higginbotham described what a new owner could expect. “We take a franchisee through every phase of the operation. We will identify the site, conduct demographic studies and introduce them to contractors. They spend five weeks in training in Phoenix. We spend three weeks at their store, two weeks before opening and one week after. We have training courses for cooks waitresses, dishwashers and hosts.”

Guido said he reminds potential franchisees that it takes more than a diner’s looks to be successful.

“We offer stability. The brand has been around since 1947 and is a spin-off of Bruster’s Ice Cream. We’re extremely good at franchising and supporting our franchisees. We are passionate about having well-run operations and making sure our brand is synonymous with quality and service and a good wholesome place.”

Big burgers, thick shakes, hip-swinging music are part of the American diner’s lore.^{ET}

Diners offer a return to simpler times, while serving up comfort food. While the independents can be found along Route 66 and other cross-country highways, franchises are bringing the concept to more urban areas.