



Comfort-Able

New York City's Comfort Diner is Up to the Challenge

Roadside Magazine

A diner is more than just 'a diner.' And a diner is more than a building. Although some may attempt to define diners simply as old prefabricated structures with counters and stainless skins, those of us who frequent these establishments know that it takes more than form to satisfy our taste. In New York City, where there are some thirty pages of restaurant listings in the Manhattan phone directory alone, the term diner has been drained of any architectural or historical significance. Here a diner is the place on the corner—a coffee shop, deli, luncheonette, bodega or a teahouse—any small local place where you can get a cup of coffee and a quick and inexpensive bite to eat.

On East 45th Street, in the shadow of the United Nations, Ira Freehof is proving that diners are as much social institutions as they are architectural and culinary fixtures. The Comfort Diner is part of a neighborhood transformation and not merely a simple renovation of the old Jay Dee's coffee shop that had served midtowners for 29 years. Freehof opened his doors in April after a year of site searching, three months of designing and fourteen weeks of construction. His work included extensive research and close examinations of historic diner interiors and fittings. "I wanted a place that I could make into a diner if I couldn't find the 'real thing.' Dick Gutman's book was an inspiration," Freehof told me as I settled into one of the Comfort's new booths, sipping a cool strawberry lemonade on a hot New York afternoon. "I looked at floor tiles and seating and lighting in an attempt to be 'true' to the diner aesthetic," he continued. And the Comfort Diner, though not 'officially' meeting diner freaks' narrow definition, joyfully achieves the spirit of the word.

"I'd like people to come here and know that they'll get a good quality meal; I want to get to know them; I want regulars." And he's got them. "Lunch is incredible - people stand outside to get in." Word has spread quickly among the towering offices and apartment buildings and through these narrow streets where diplomats, lawyers, advertising and entertainment people, tourists and families travel. "There are a lot of foreign students nearby learning English," Ira explained, "and they come in here to eat and practice their new language. They see the diner as part of their

education about America." If Ira's enthusiasm and gregarious personality, good food and 'honest' design aren't enough, there's also a diner history map on the stairs that descend to the wash room. Freehof may seem a bit anachronistic at times, as diner owners known to be sometimes, but he's not a romantic or sentimentalist about The Comfort and he knows the food service business well - a requirement in New York. Before going out on his own he worked for 19 years operating some of the city's more fashionable restaurants. But when it came to starting his own business he decided on a diner. "I wanted to do something fun and affordable - I wasn't always satisfied with the higher-priced upscale restaurants I was managing."

The menu too reflects Freehof's contemporary appreciation for the diner spirit. "I've got food for people with different dietary and nutritional tastes and requirements," he said as we shared a tasty Cobb Salad sandwich (a sort-of rolled club sandwich with grilled chicken, and avocado) and a large plate of 'Mom's Meatloaf'. (Ira apologizes that this dish, served with great garlic mashed potatoes and fresh vegetables, is better than anything his mother cooked up).

Breakfast, as it should be, is served all day and includes cereals, fruit, eggs, omelets, waffles, pancakes, fresh muffins and biscuits. But New Yorkers are not known for taking time for their breakfast. "We get a lot of takeout orders but it seems only tourists take the time to sit down." Lunch and dinner offer many spins on the traditional diner fare. There are classic sandwiches and burgers as well as specialties like wild mushroom potato pancakes, tangy carrot and ginger soup, Rhode Island clam fritters (Ira originally hails from Bristol) and a "Good Eater's Club" for kids.

Before heading back out into the urban jungle, visitors should carefully read a small section at the bottom of the menu and gaze at the numerous counter displays. Desserts at the Comfort are not taken lightly. The baker, Lynn, is incredible. Her apple pie, peach crumb pie, coconut banana cream pie, chocolate layer cake and rice pudding (to name just a few!) are so good diners should be required to do some research and sample the changing selections. I tried the deep-dish pecan and it was fresh and flavorful, not syrupy sweet. And the Comfort's coffee is good and strong, too. Luncheonette? Coffeeshop? Restaurant? With the spirit that Ira Freehof and his staff bring to the counter, The Comfort is a diner in the fullest sense of the word.

The Comfort Diner 214 45th Street NY, NY 212-867-4555 Open seven days: M-F, 7am - 10 pm Sat and Sunday 9am - 10 pm.