

Worth the Trip through Time

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By Melissa Pasanen

The regulars sitting around the horseshoe-shaped counter one recent morning at the Wayside Restaurant in Berlin were getting their fill of eggs, orange and cream-topped pancakes, and corned beef hash -- as well as the kind of friendly banter that gets the day off to a good start.

"That's why we come in here," said counter regular East Montpelier dairy farmer Austin Cleaves as he and longtime Wayside waitress Connie Haldane threw good-natured jibes back and forth.

The other reason, Cleaves added, is solid food at the right price. "A couple of days ago, I had the lunch special," he said, "baked ham, vegetable, roll and soup for \$5.95. For a hot meal, you can't beat that."

Many loyal customers will testify that -- for its value and camaraderie -- the Wayside is a habit that's hard to break.

Digging into his plate of eggs, home fries and the restaurant's own wheat toast, Caroll Witham of East Montpelier said that he's been coming since the late '50s. "I go back before the Gelfettis," Witham noted.

Eugene Gelfetti -- father of Karen Zecchinelli who now owns the Wayside with her husband Brian -- bought the restaurant in 1966 from Mrs. Fish. She had purchased it, in turn, from the Wayside's creator, Mrs. Ballou, who first rolled up a garage door to open the restaurant in 1918.

The garage door is long gone, but the Wayside remains a local fixture for down-home comfort food at economical prices. Thanks to its lightly sweet, yeast-scented Parker House rolls; soft, creamy Grapenut pudding; and other classics, it has also become a tourist guidebook star, especially as regionally distinct, family-owned eateries disappear across the country.

In their 1983 book "GoodFood," Americana food experts Jane and Michael Stern wrote of the Wayside, "You won't find a better informal place to sample a changing bill of authentic Yankee fare." After a 2003 visit, they reiterated the praise on their Web site (www.roadfood.com -- a great source for travelers looking for authentic local eats) saying, "You will eat well any time you come to this cheerful town lunch room."

The Wayside's most recent national accolade is a four-star rating in Disney's "Family Fun Vacation Guide: New England," which called the restaurant "one in a million," praising its value, kid-friendly demeanor, sugar donuts, chicken pot pie and salt pork.

The locals agree. "If anyone's traveling around here," said East Montpelier resident Richard Warmann over a huge bowl of oatmeal, "There's only one place to tell them to go."

There are plenty of booths in the large restaurant, but it's at the counter where you really feel the spirit of the place. That's where farmers mingle with doctors and retirees over really good crisp, sugary buttermilk doughnuts; Grapenut-topped oatmeal; and -- during deer season -- a hunter's special of 10 eggs and 10 slices of the restaurant's own freshly baked bread (yes, that's for one person).

Later in the day, the specials menu might offer just-caught local perch, meat loaf or slow-roasted pork with homemade dressing. There's always pork liver and onions, haddock fried or broiled, and every main comes with a choice of two sides, which often feature seasonal vegetables like spring-dug parsnips or steamed fiddleheads with butter and vinegar. Every day the bakery turns out glossy, soft dinner rolls and a double-size of the same dough for their burgers (soon to be made from local, hormone-free beef); dense maple cream and pecan pies; and assorted other treats like sticky-sweet date squares.

Thursday is pork day at the Wayside with both roast pork and salt pork specials. Strips of fatty cured pork are deep-fried to the ultimate crisp and a dunk in mellow milk gravy tames their saltiness perfectly. To anyone (like me) with a soft spot for bacon, they are addictive.

Fried tripe is also back on the menu, said co-owner Brian Zecchinelli. "They come from all over for the tripe," he continued -- so I had to try the soft, thin slice of lightly tangy pickled tripe sheathed in a crunchy cornmeal crust. Yes, it's cow stomach, but it's really quite good and testament to the fact that anything pickled and fried can't be all bad. (I'm not sure I could handle it as counter customer Buck Jones of Orange Center does: "raw right out of the barrel.")

Standing in the middle of the busy restaurant, Brian Zecchinelli didn't skip two beats when asked the secret of the Wayside's success: it's all about consistently good food and good service he said, but the bottomline is the people. "The customers. The good employees," he said. "They've both been around a long time." We want your restaurant, dining event, and food news for future Taste of Vermont features. Please contact Melissa Pasanen at mpasanen@aol.com.

Abstract (Document Summary)

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