

A Real Diner

At The Stem, you don't have to settle for manufactured nostalgia

By David Hayes *Reader's Digest* August 2008

It's 10:45 on a Sunday morning and I'm exactly where I want to be: sitting with my girlfriend in a booth-for-two at The Stem Open Kitchen on Toronto's Queen Street West. Our waitress, a tall brunette in her middle years whose hair is always in a ponytail, recognized us when we came in and brought to the table my girlfriend's coffee and my tea, "with lots of milk," without asking. When she takes our order, she turns to me and says, "Cheddar cheese omelette, brown toast, marmalade?" I nod, strangely overjoyed, filled with rapture, even.

What church does for some, a great greasy spoon diner does for me. And The Stem qualifies. The smell of home fries, bacon and coffee is as comforting as a benediction. The menu contains only old-fashioned, homey food at reasonable prices. (Along with breakfasts, there is classic diner fare: burgers, club sandwiches, homemade soups, milkshakes and the like.) The décor is unpretentious: faded checkerboard tiles, faded wallpaper in a geometric '50s design; well-worn red vinyl covering the benches in the dozen booths and the tops of ten stools along the counter. (To say that the Stem has never been subjected to the tyranny of design consultants is an understatement.)

Inside every great diner visitors can glimpse the soul of a city in all its diversity: young and old, rich and poor, well-dressed and shabby. The clientele at The Stem is a mix of young bohos, middle-aged boomers and a few old-timers. This morning, for example, a couple, fiftyish, dressed as though they're en route to a matinee performance of the ballet, sit across from a rather sweet family of two young kids with a mom and dad sporting Mohawks and facial piercings. At the counter sits a gentleman, who must have been born shortly before the Baby Boom, chatting to William Pulezas, the 80-year-old owner of The Stem who oversees the joint nearly every day and still whips up meals at the grill.

In his 1989 book, *The Great Good Place*, sociologist Ray Oldenburg wrote about the trinity of modern life: home, the workplace and what he called a "third place" – local, informal, comforting refuges such as community centres, bookstores, cafes and, yes, casual diners like The Stem – where people regularly congregate to relax and commune with friends.

This isn't to be confused with chic "retro" diners that we see in many cities. These ersatz places try, but fail, to recreate the nostalgic atmosphere of a diner through the use of Formica, Naugahyde, stainless steel, plasticized menus and diner-style food. For example, the retro Johnny Rockets chain in the U.S. or Wimpy's, a Canadian chain of franchise diners that are, according to the company's clumsily-written web site, "adorned with the 50's and 60's theme with coin operated juke boxes and decorated with memorabilia." It's like eating breakfast on the set of *Happy Days*.

The origin of the diner lay in the ambitions of Walter Scott, a young newspaperman in Providence, R.I. who, around the mid-19th century, moonlighted by selling sandwiches and coffee to shift workers, a venture that became so successful he bought a horse and wagon to take his meals from business to business. Soon "lunch wagons" grew large enough for customers to stand inside. The term "greasy spoon" grew out of a suspicion – widely held by women and often justified – that hygiene in these new dining spots left something to be desired, as did the working class clientele. By the 1920s, municipal regulations limited the number of lunch wagons roaming the streets so their owners staked out promising locations at permanent street addresses – the first diners as we know them.

Inspired by the elegant Pullman cars serving fine food to train passengers, many diners cleaned up their acts and evolved into long, narrow, affordable mom-and-pop restaurants. And beginning in the '30s, they began reflecting the modern, streamlined look that was popular through North America culture at that time. Soon, Formica, fluorescent lighting and aerodynamic shapes gave diners a sleek, efficient appearance. The next three decades are called the "Golden Age" of diners.

Today, people say that diners are an endangered species, a process that began with the rising popularity of fast-food chains in the '60s and aggravated, more recently, by the trend toward cafes serving multi-barreled designer coffee. (You won't hear a single "tall-skim-double-shot-vanilla-latte-with-whip" at The Stem, just one of its many blessings.)

It's the day after our Sunday breakfast and I'm sitting in a booth next to William Pulenzas, the 80-year-old owner of The Stem. At 9:45 a.m., there are only three customers. Pulenzas, in his customary white pin-striped shirt, dark dress pants and stained white apron, is peeling and chopping onions at the end of the open kitchen. He has wispy gray hair and a pronounced limp from a bum knee.

He explains that he bought The Stem in 1953 with his father, who had come to Canada from Macedonia and worked in the restaurant trade for years. The original owners couldn't make a go of it and no one knows why it was called The Stem. (When I later asked Pulenzas' son, Larry, about it he said: "The granddaughter of the previous owner came by once and she had no idea either.")

"This type of place has a hard time surviving now," says Pulenzas. "The cost of operating it makes it not very profitable. It's not just rent, it's the cost of utilities, like gas and hydro, repairs, labour costs, insurance. Diners like The Stem are fading, becoming history."

Excusing herself with a grin, one of The Stem's friendly waitresses, Helen, who is Pulenzas' daughter-in-law, yells: "Can I get a bacon over easy with brown."

Pulenzas limps to the grill, chops at the home fries with a spatula, takes several strips of bacon from a stainless steel container and tosses them on the grill. The art of a diner grillman is all in the timing. With practiced precision Pulenzas drops

the bread in the toaster, cracks a pair of eggs and drops them onto the grill. A minute or so later, he slides the meal onto a plate and drops it on the counter for Helen to pick up.

Although the burgers are still homemade patties, there was a time when Pulenzas roasted chickens in the oven and served roast beef dinners. Returning to his onions, Pulenzas says: "We used to be open until 1 a.m., seven days a week, even just 15 years ago. Today, Saturday and Sunday keeps us alive. And the all-day breakfast."

There's a reason breakfasts are the salvation for diners. The one thing fast-food restaurants, with their cheap burgers, subs, wraps and pita pockets, can't provide is the ultimate comfort food: a home-cooked plate of eggs, home fries, bacon or sausages and toast. Apparently a lot of diner aficionados, like me, favour this meal anytime of the day. It may sound like it contradicts everything we hear about eating habits becoming healthier, but are we really so righteous? Aren't diners threatened because of the popularity of fast-food chains, with their high-fat, high-sodium, pre-prepared fare?

So breakfast is the meal I use to evaluate every diner I visit. (After decades of research, I consider The Stem to be the best diner in Toronto. Its only near-equal is Mars Food – "Just Out of this World" – at College and Bathurst Streets.) And the dish I consider to be the foundation glory of diner cooking is a cheddar cheese omelette. My expectations are few but stringent:

- A cheese omelette should be generous, made with real cheddar cheese (not processed stuff) and neither over nor under-cooked.
- The home fries it comes with must be real potatoes prepared on the grill, not deep-fried like French fries, and should contain onions.
- The coffee should be strong and flavourful. Since I drink tea, I've relied on a succession of coffee-drinking consultants to handle that part of the research. (Despite being a purist, I'm flexible enough to accept an espresso machine so long as the diner gets everything else right.)

On all counts The Stem meets my platonic ideal. The omelette is always golden in colour with a few streaks of brown, the cheddar oozing in the centre. The home fries – crisp and brown on the outside, soft on the inside – are the ideal supporting act, complementing the headliner without overshadowing it. (I'm reminded of seeing Stevie Wonder open for The Rolling Stones at Maple Leaf Gardens in 1972.)

Later that morning I talked to William's son, Larry, a familiar figure at The Stem, manning the grill in his customary black t-shirt and jeans. Larry used to work in construction and ran bars in the '80s before deciding to help out his aging father in the family business. "It's a changing business," he says. "It's moving away from the owner-operator to the franchise and investors would rather put \$100,000 into a franchise. It's the slow demise of the smaller, local, low-end restaurant."

About his father, he says: "Working here keeps him out of the rocking chair in the window. As long as he can stay on his feet he'll be here. Will I be here ten years from now? I don't think so."

At a time when this once-bohemian strip of Queen Street West has been largely tamed and gentrified, The Stem is a reminder of another era. Today, its neighbors are chains like The Gap, Le Chateau, H&M, Club Monaco, Lululemon. Directly across the street from The Stem is Tutti Frutti, one of a variety of retro candy stores supplying boomers (and anyone else with a sweet tooth) with candy that was popular from the '50s to the '70s. Apparently campy stores ironically packaging nostalgia prosper while the real thing fades away.