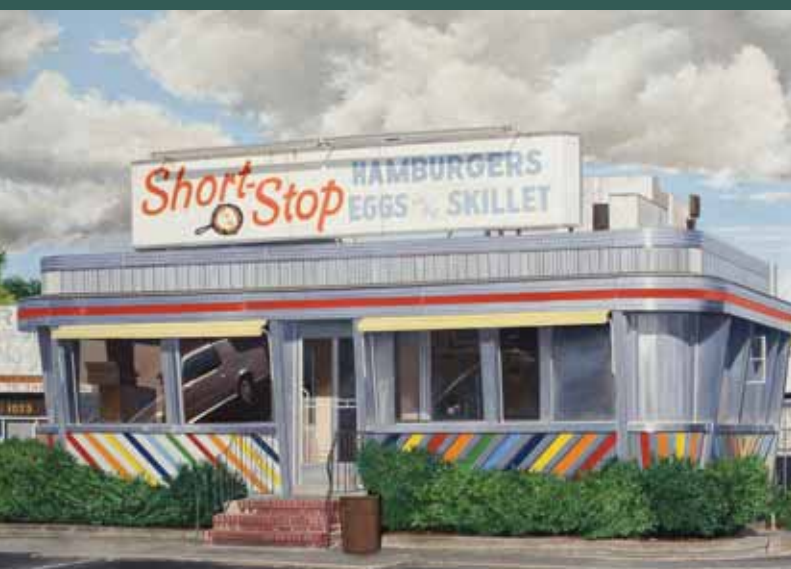


By DAVID CHESANOW

Image Credits: Paintings courtesy of John Baeder • Matchbooks; Ed Brassard
Silver Moon Diner Photos; Kullman Buildings Corp.

A blast from the Repast

Diners still serve
motorists good eats with
a side order of nostalgia



Over the broad and changeable landscape of American popular culture, the automobile crosses all terrains, all social divides: From art and music to sport and lifestyle, among rich and poor, regardless of gender, race, creed or political persuasion, cars continue to elicit the same fanfare and excitement that greeted the first “horseless carriages” in city streets and cow towns across a U.S. on the threshold of the twentieth century. They have always been, and will always be, cool.



Cars, and the people who ride in them, have needs, the most basic of which is fuel. And so car culture met food culture along the nation's roadways, giving rise to a distinctly American icon: the diner.

Even those with no firsthand experience of real diners still recognize them on sight from their depictions in the media and through the paintings of John Baeder, a former advertising art director who began creating stunningly realistic portraits of diners for postcards in the early 1970s; today his work is in major museums and private collections around the world.

“I like to consider myself a preservationist first and a painter second,” Baeder said of his diner images. Originally from Atlanta, and author of the roadside classics *Diners* and *Gas, Food, and Lodging* (first published in 1978 and 1982, respectively), Baeder recalled the impression that diners made on him before he ever considered them subjects for paintings. “I was photographing storefronts and signage, and then a diner would pop up and I would just photograph it because I didn’t grow up with diners. I sort of saw them as temples from a lost civilization, I guess. I liked the uniqueness of the diner in the way it was placed in its environment, and how different they were in the city as opposed to, say, out in the country.”

What exactly are diners, and where did they come from?

Along with Baeder, architect Richard Gutman created new generations of diner lovers and rejuvenated older ones by recognizing the structures as vanishing Americana with his 1979 book *American Diner*. Now curator and director of the Culinary Archives & Museum at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, R.I., Gutman identifies the diner in its purest form as a prefabricated building with counter service that can be moved long-distance and plunked down where the owner wants it. More casually, he described diners as “shiny, compact, portable buildings that focused on the counter, where the food was made right behind it, and were clad in materials that made them stand out from other buildings, so that if you’re tooling down the two-lane blacktop, it’s going to stop you in your tracks by the way it looks and by the promise of good food and a nice cup of coffee.”

Indeed, Gutman pointed out, long before diners became retro idealizations, their attraction was “homecooked food, there’s a wide selection, the prices are good, you see it come out of the icebox and thrown on the grill, and then it’s slid down the counter to you and then you don’t have to do the dishes either. “So what’s not to like?” For the hungry traveler, the family dining out and the worker on lunch break, not a whole lot.



In fact, late-shift working men formed the clientele of Providence, R.I., entrepreneur Walter Scott when he began selling hard-boiled eggs and sandwiches out of a horse-drawn freight car in the early 1870s. Over ensuing decades Scott and his “night lunch wagon” found imitators. The makers of horse cars (the predecessors of motorized buses) began to build conveyances for use as food concessions. When city ordinances started to restrict the wagons’ all-hours custom in the early 1900s, their owners simply lost the wheels, creating the prototype of the diner as we know it.

Ease of transport was an essential feature of diners, which were usually located along highways in order to cater to truckers, a major chunk of the motor traffic through the 1920s. While the Depression spelled disaster for other industries, like the railroads, it spurred a growth period for diners, said Randy Garbin, founder of *Roadside* magazine and author of *Diners of New England*. “Despite the fact that the country was in hard times, people still had to eat, and there were actually



A lot of diners’ appeal was physical; They emanated the same modernism of the cars that their customers arrived in. “Diners were pretty outrageous-looking buildings—they were clad in stainless steel, for crying out loud—and they were still very streamlined. They looked like they moved,” Garbin pointed out. “They had what I have referred to as the transportation metaphor, and they kept that into the sixties.”

“Diners used to come out with new models every year, almost like the cars,” noted Harold Kullman, whose father, Sam, began building the now legendary Kullman diners in 1927. Now 82, the younger Kullman joined the New Jersey-based business in 1946. “Every year we’d come out with a new design... we would change the corners of the diner—that was sort of a takeoff on the cars—and I guess when Cadillacs had those big tailfins, we were building diners with canopies flaring up from the roofs.”

In the 1950s and sixties, just as independent automakers were driven to extinction, the classic mom-and-pop diners, assaulted by



- ◀ From left: John Baeder, “Short-Stop” (Bloomfield, N.J.) oil on Canvas, 30 x 48” © 1978. Diner postcards and matchbooks have become prized collectibles representing a vanishing aspect of roadside ‘Americana.’
- ▶ The classic diner is alive and well in the form of this “Silver Moon Diner” by the Kullman Buildings Corp.
- ▼ John Baeder, “Big Mikes” (Harrison, N.J.) oil on Canvas, 30 x 48” © 1978. www.johnbaeder.com.



companies that were getting out of their first line of business and starting to build diners.” Some of these struggling companies were builders of railroad cars; small wonder that the classic elongated diner—a term believed to have evolved from “dining car”—is so reminiscent of rolling stock. The long layout made the counter the diner’s defining characteristic; it also made it easier to clean.

After the Second World War, Americans’ patronage of diners paralleled their ownership of automobiles. Returning veterans were going to college on the G.I. Bill, then getting better jobs. Some even purchased diners, marketed as great businesses for independent operators. Families were buying their very first cars. Working people had disposable income. What they needed were places to dispose of it. In the late 1940s and ‘50s, diners offered good, familiar food; meat loaf, turkey, BLTs, pancakes, at good prices for travelers and local folks alike.

“The concept of the diner had been in existence for a long time; they were largely populated by working men who would go there for lunch or after work, that kind of thing. Now diners were positioning themselves as family restaurants, or at least trying to,” Garbin said.

fast-food chains and left to languish on backroads by the new interstate system, were abandoned to the roadside weeds or reconfigured into Mediterranean or Early American design eateries bearing little evidence of their forward-looking streamlined origins.

But Americans are a nostalgic people, and business people are discovering that good food plus retro ambiance equals a salable commodity—even if the “home-style” entrées on the menu now include Tandoori chicken, pad Thai or stir-fry. Indeed, diners are undergoing a renaissance, and companies like the Kullman Buildings Corp. continue to design them in stainless steel with an in-your-face Art Moderne look for the twenty-first-century customer. Be sure to grab a seat at the counter. **STOP**



- For more on diners ...view many of John Baeder’s paintings online at www.johnbaeder.com.
- In addition to the books mentioned in the article, see Richard Gutman’s *American Diner Then & Now* (1993), which bears little resemblance to his earlier volume. • Visit www.roadsideonline.com to learn about *Roadside* magazine and Randy Garbin’s diner recipe books.
 - Tour the Kullman Buildings Corp. Web site at www.kullman.com.