

Grits and good conversation

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For The Miami Student

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For years, Hollywood has tried to recreate the small town diner. Stereotypes have been drawn, jokes have been made, molds have been cast. We all have some idea of what a small town diner SHOULD be (according to Hollywood) and, for better or for worse, expect every diner to live up to that. The Oxford Diner is a perfect example of what we hope for in such a place ... And so much more.

In April 2006, The Oxford Diner opened its doors under the management of the Swafford family. Kim and Dick Swafford and their children Corey, Sarah, and Mary Jane, started the diner on a whim. "I've worked in the food industry forever," Kim explains. "But never had my own place."

Phillips 27, Oxford's local diner for over forty years, shut down in January 2005, and Kim jumped at the chance to open the town's next diner. "We had never run a restaurant before," Kim admits, explaining that it was sheer insanity when the diner first opened.

"We were not expecting what we got hit with," Dick says. Their first customer, a Miami student named Andrew ordered a stack of two pancakes and a cup of coffee. Since then, the diner has served countless pancakes and poured myriad cups of coffee, but there's more to just The Oxford Diner than food.

Regulars

Go to Oxford Diner 8 a.m. on a weekday morning and you'll find three types of people: customers, workers, and the regulars. The customers are the ones eating, the workers are the ones serving food, and the regulars are the ones who sit at the counter, have their own seats, and whose orders never change. The waitresses know their names, their faces, and their backgrounds along with how they take their coffee.

"They're like family to us." Juanita Baker, a waitress, explains. "I couldn't imagine life without coming to the diner and seeing everyone. I even come in here on days I don't have to work!" And who can blame her? The colorful regulars make for an exciting morning, from their discussions about telemarketers ("The best is when they call for your wife and you say, 'she's deceased!'") to their conclusions on poodles ("It's the smartest dog because it's been living with people for so long.")

The regulars serve the others coffee if the waitresses are busy, retrieve their own jelly from over the counter, and joke around with staff. They don't see the diner so much as a restaurant as a home away from home. "Everyone knows you; it's like a second family," one regular says. "Every town should have something like this diner."

The Blackout

The Oxford Diner has committed to serving the community—even in the harshest circumstances. They're open on holidays, in snowstorms, and even during blackouts.

Everyone remembers that fateful September day when, in one painful moment, Oxford lost all electricity. It came to be known as Miami Blackout to students, but to the Oxford Diner, those days without power were anything BUT a blackout.

“We were the only place still serving and we were packed,” Kim recalls. “All the townies were cramming in here to get coffee, students came here in packs of 8 and 10. Filled past capacity for four days in a row because nowhere else was open.”

By means of flashlights, gas, lanterns, and ice (nearly \$200 worth of it), the diner stayed open all throughout the blackout. “From Sunday night until Wednesday, it was craziness.” Baker says. “Just absolutely crazy.”

Eating Contests

In a college town, it is essential that there be a place where students can prove how much they can eat before they vomit. Luckily for Miami, Oxford Diner has not one but TWO such opportunities available to any coed longing to be remembered for stuffing inhumane amounts of food down his or her throat.

Every November the diner hosts a hotdog eating contest. The winner gets free Sunday breakfast for the remainder of the school year, not to mention the complementary fear of ever eating a hotdog again. “It's mostly students who compete, always a student who wins.” Kim says.

While the hotdog frivolity only comes once a year, The Terminator challenge is ongoing and can be ordered up any day. The diner's menu describes The Terminator as an ice cream sundae, with one gallon of ice cream smothered in chocolate syrup, whipped cream, and topped off with a cherry. “If you eat the whole thing, then your picture can go on the wall.” Kim says, pointing to a collection of Polaroid pictures that nearly cover up the words TERMINATOR WALL OF FAME, which mostly sports pictures of nauseous yet content-looking frat boys. “It's just a little thing we do.”

“Little” hardly seems the right word.

Ghosts

Two college students are quietly enjoying Sunday brunch when two red canisters sitting atop one of the diner's shelves fly across the room. There is no culprit in sight—not to mention the shelf was far out of anyone's reach. One student turns to Kim and asks, “Did you see that?”

“Everyone who works here has had something weird happen to them,” Kim explains nonchalantly. “I think if this place is haunted, it has got to be an old customer.” Kim cites two possibilities, a man named Mike and the “radio guy.”

The first, Mike, was a diner favorite. He left the diner one day in a bad snowstorm and never made it home. “We all loved Mike,” Sarah recalls. “He gave us a lot of the decorations in here, including those red canisters.”

The second, an unknown customer who ordered lemonade and chili, came in every day at 11:30 and asked to turn the radio off. “When he died, about three or four months after that, the radio

would turn off at 11:30.” Kim says. Sarah, Kim’s daughter and diner waitress, adds that it will still turn on and off by itself from time to time.

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” Kim claims. “But this place is making me change my mind.”

Peculiar Customers

Juanita Baker and Sarah Swafford have been at the Oxford Diner since it opened, and the two waitresses have accumulated quite the resume of peculiar customers. Any restaurant has their fair share of characters, but for Juanita and Sarah, Oxford Diner takes the cake.

One man wearing a cowboy hat so low you couldn’t see his eyes came in one day, sat down at the counter and asked, “Have you ever waited on a dead guy before?” After four days of eating at the diner, all the man told them was that he was dead, and he worked for God. “He only came in for three days,” Kim says. “And then we never saw him again.”

Some customers they never want to see again. One man, clearly inebriated, was kind enough to visit the diner and urinate in the back hallway and pass out in one of the booths. The next day—after the Swaffords spoke to the Oxford police about prohibiting the man from returning to the diner—he stumbled inside and said, “You people are so much nicer than those other ones, they kicked me out.” Sarah shook her head and said, “Yeah, that was us, buddy.”

A Family Affair

Not only is the diner family-owned and run by the Swaffords, but the entire place is riddled with Swafford family ties. “Six of these paintings are done by my grandmother,” Kim says, gesturing to multiple landscapes hanging around the diner. Other diner décor is also familial: The antique kitchen utensils are from Kim’s Uncle Mike and the life-size, autographed John Wayne caricature is a gift from an aunt.

The crutch of the diner, the menu, is filled with family recipes. Peanut butter pancakes are second-nature to the Swafford family. “We grew up with peanut butter pancakes.” Sarah says. “I didn’t even know putting peanut butter on pancakes was weird. I thought it was just like syrup!”

The Bread Pudding is a secret recipe of Kim’s Grandmother served only on Sundays. “I finally got the recipe out of her when I opened the diner.” Kim explains. Other family recipes include the chicken and dumplings, a diner favorite, and the stuffing.

The Oxford Diner is a strange mix of townies and students, regulars and first-timers, entertainers and spectators. The colorful characters—from the waitress telling a story about a deranged horse to the man at the counter vocalizing his opinions on helicopter chases—will surely make your diner experience more than just a meal.

The Oxford Diner is located on Highway 27, next to the Marathon gas station just before Wal-Mart.



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