

# THE PLAIN DEALER

## The Diner on Clifton is envy of neighborhoods

By RALPH MCGREEVY

For years, Clifton Lunch was a traditional diner: open 24 hours, counter seating, a good cup of coffee and breakfast served all day. The diner at the corner of W. 117th St. and Clifton Blvd. looked like many other across the United States.

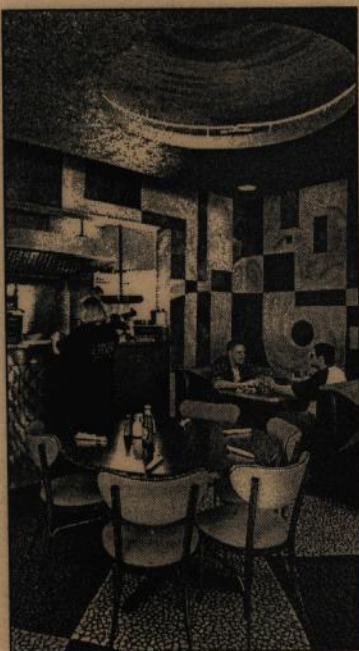
All that changed when owner Perry Drosos closed his establishment much of last year. Former patrons could be seen peering through the tiny windows, shrugging their shoulders and then heading off, presumably looking for another diner to frequent.

Then things started to happen. Architect Rich Lalli had the windows enlarged and redefined the space, leaving the counter. When the purple awnings were installed, the new name read "The Diner on Clifton."

Seeing the lights back on and the door open, the regulars returned. They found the place had changed: It was no longer open at all hours, but had a full-service kitchen with a top-notch chef. Owner Drosos wanted to be a force in Cleveland's emerging culinary scene, but he wasn't in Tremont or the Warehouse District. Not only did he redecorate, using hip young artist Chris Schramm (who defined the look of Lola's and, most recently, The Flying Fig and Yorkville Cafe), but also teamed him with interior designer Mindy Steuwe.

The menu cover claims that The Diner on Clifton is a "50s diner with a '90s tempo." I'm not sure what that means, but my hunch is it has to do with the whimsical interior that Schramm and Steuwe came up with.

What Drosos did with his thriving diner was risky. From the packed house I witnessed during



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**Dramatic architectural and artistic detail combine to make dining in The Diner On Clifton a more lively experience.**

three visits, it looks like the risk paid off.

As my guest and I settled in at a two-seat table, I was soon impressed. The cream of broccoli soup was delicious, had a good consistency and was just the right temperature. Likewise, my guest was delighted with his salad: The homemade honey balsamic dressing was the perfect complement to his fresh greens, tomatoes, cucumbers and red onions that accompanied our entrees.

Conversation quieted as we were presented with our entrees. The half roast herbed garlic chicken (\$9.95) was steaming hot

### TASTE BITES

#### The Diner On Clifton

Where: 11637 Clifton Blvd. (corner of W. 117th St.), Cleveland

Call: (216) 521-5003

Hours: 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily

Reservations: None

Prices: Appetizers \$2.75-\$5.95; Hot

Diner favorites \$6.95; Entrees

\$7.95-\$12.95

Credit cards: Visa, Mastercard, Discover

Don't Miss: portabello mushroom

wrap, half roast herbed garlic

chicken.

Noteworthy: Beer and wine service to

begin during September.

No non-smoking seats on weekends.

Accessible to wheelchairs from street,

but not to the lavatories.

• Plain Dealer reviewers make at least two anonymous visits to each restaurant and do not accept complimentary meals.

and had an ample serving of buttermilk chive mashed potatoes and glazed pecan green beans. The beans were al dente and flavorful. My guest raved about his meal.

I had the linguine pasta (\$8.95), tossed in olive oil and garlic and complemented with julienne chicken breast, sun-dried tomatoes and portabello mushrooms. Overall, it was every bit as good as pasta dishes that are being served around Cleveland's finest Italian restaurants. This was an unexpected pleasure from a neighborhood diner.

As it turns out, the owner not only put his money and effort into a new interior but also hired chef Tom Szoradi, who had spent five years in the kitchen at Giovanni's on Chagrin Blvd. and, previously, at Player's. Szoradi was given

control of designing the menu and has many delightful additions to the standard diner fare.

On other visits we sampled from the "Hot Diner Favorites" portion of the menu. Dishes such as the hot meatloaf (\$6.95), eggs-bacon-and-home fries (\$3.95; the waiter forgot the toast), onion rings (\$2.75), cheeseburger (\$6.50) and a milk shake were all fine. Each dish was typical diner food, the kind you can get most anywhere.

Even better, though, were several of the wrap sandwiches that I tried. The portabello wrap (\$6.95) had caramelized onions, roasted red peppers, julienne spinach and roasted garlic mayonnaise to complement the generous portion of portabello strips. The wrap itself was grilled, accompanied by sweet potato fries. The Santa Fe chicken wrap (\$6.95) has a jalapeno cheddar tortilla filled with julienne chicken breast, roast corn, black bean relish and is served with homemade tortilla chips with guacamole and tomato salsa. They were some of the best wraps I've ever tasted, and I like wraps.

All in all, each visit was better than the last. The success, as I saw it, had everything to do with what I ordered. When you visit The Diner on Clifton, try one of the more elaborate items. Yes, they have good diner food, but Szoradi's entrees are worth the trip. Every neighborhood should be so lucky to have such a place.

McGreevy is a free-lance writer in Lakewood.