

Jack's of New London | EATS

Where (almost) everybody knows your name

BY John Walters

PHOTOGRAPHY BY Jon Gilbert Fox

The first time I walked into Jack's Coffee, I thought I had entered a long established fixture of New London community life. Its charm, its woody warmth, its comfortable seating all bespoke a place that had been here for many years.

That was in the spring of 2000. I found out later, to my surprise, that Jack's was virtually brand new, and was owned by a pair of 20-somethings fresh out of college. But my first impression wasn't entirely mistaken. Jack's had begun to establish itself as the neighborhood hangout it was meant to be. And it still is, although it has gone through some changes since then.

Start with the name. It's not "Jack's Coffee" anymore — it's "Jack's of New London," reflecting its expansion beyond breakfast and lunch. But it's still the same old Jack, although he's no longer a 20-something, having reached the ripe old age of 31.

"We started out young, and we've been perfecting it ever since," says Jack Diemar, co-owner of Jack's with his wife, Jody. When they opened the place on 207 Main Street in 1999, they were new to the food business. "Sometimes I look back on some of the things we did at first, and I'm amazed that people stuck with us." For example? "The first day we opened, we didn't have cream or sugar because Jody and I both drink our coffee



Jack Diemar visits with customers (left to right) from Grantham: Susan Damon, Jennie Laramie and Anna Hurst.

black, so we didn't even think to have cream! We made a quick run to Jiffy Mart, and got our cream for the day."

Between then and now, a lot of lessons learned, a lot of new ideas tried out. One of those changes came in spring 2006, when Diemar hired Executive Chef Andrew Gruel to refresh and refocus the menu.

Okay, okay, make the joke, get it out of your system: "Chef Gruel." He's heard it before. "At culinary school, everybody seemed to think it was the funniest thing in the world. At first it was, but by the second year it wasn't so funny anymore," he says. Gruel is, in fact, a darn good cook. He's a graduate

of the renowned Johnson & Wales College of Culinary Arts. At the age of 25, he's already a veteran in the business, and he came to Jack's from the Ritz Hotel in Boston, Mass.

How does he describe the cuisine at Jack's? "I like to call it contemporary comfort. We use traditional American ingredients and recipes, and step it up a little bit," Gruel says. He emphasizes high quality ingredients, produced locally whenever possible: "A lot of restaurants get all their food from a single large distributor. I probably have 20 to 25 different purveyors." The menu changes with the seasons, making

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abundant use of foods available locally.

Gruel is clearly devoted to his craft, but he has a sense of humor about it as well. Many of his dishes have a playful touch, like onion rings in the lunch menu's top seller, the Flavor Country sandwich. The onion rings are not a side dish; they are tucked into the sandwich along with the grilled chicken, tomatoes, cheese and pickles.

Another example: His own take on the grilled peanut butter and banana, the late Elvis Presley's favorite sandwich. Gruel uses Nutella, the chocolate hazelnut spread, to complement the banana, and tops the sandwich with powdered sugar. Think of it as lunch and dessert all at once.

The creativity arises from the backstage camaraderie at Jack's. "When I arrived, Jack had literally nobody working in the kitchen," Gruel says. "So I called up two of my best friends, and they uprooted their lives and came up here. We all share the same vision, we like each other and we feed off each other."

The story of Jack's

Some have criticized Jack's claims of locality; after all, the Diemars have only lived here since 1999. But he can claim much longer ties to the community; his family vacationed here throughout his childhood, and from 1979 to 1985 his grandparents owned The Wicker Loft, a retail store that was located in what is now Graham McSwiney's law offices on Main Street in New London. On the restaurant wall, there's a photo of the 1975 New London Hospital Days parade featuring a group of young children; the youngest is Jack Diemar, born in July and parading in August.

Jack and Jody studied marketing in college. In fact, the idea for Jack's Coffee began as a class project. After graduation, the young couple was living in New



Lou Canada, one of the chefs at Jack's, puts the finishing touch on *creme brûlées*.

London; they saw a need for a place to hang out, read the newspaper and have a cup of coffee. Diemar dusted off his homework assignment, and that's how Jack's Coffee was born.

The Diemars are young, energetic and full of ideas. Some work out, some don't. You may recall the time when they operated four "Jack's Coffees," in New London, Sunapee, Newport and West Lebanon. But it was hard to maintain quality. "We had four mediocre locations instead of one good one," Diemar says.

They cut back to the

original store in New London, and in 2004 they launched a dinner and catering operation. They changed the name to Jack's of New London — but a lot of residents had trouble catching up with the changes. Recently, the Diemars decided to "go back to the basics," abandoning dinner service and extending lunch until 6 p.m.

Dinner never achieved the popularity of breakfast and lunch, but the catering service is booming. That created a problem: The kitchen at Jack's is very small. Whenever there was a big catering job, they'd have to close the restaurant for dinner. "We're booked almost every weekend for catering this summer," Diemar says. "We would have to close for dinner almost every Thursday, Friday and Saturday, which didn't seem like the best idea."

The Diemars have also been busy on the home front. While Jack still keeps long hours at the restaurant — "It's important for me to be here, and for people to see me," he says — Jody now spends most of her time raising their three children, Hayley, Courtney and Jack. (Not Jack Junior — the two Jacks have different middle names.)

A long-lived building

Much of the comfortable feel of Jack's can be credited to its 200-year-old building, which used to be Baynham's General Store. Diemar wisely retained



Owen Christopher Crate of Enfield enjoys his "You're a Star" grilled cheese sandwich.

much of the interior decor, including those well-worn wood floors and the occasionally noisy heating system.

"The furnace is in the basement, attached to the floor," Diemar says. "When the furnace fires up, the whole building shakes. Someone asked me if we have the A-train going underneath the building." But he's willing to put up with the quirks in exchange for the homey atmosphere.

There are also some inconveniences behind the scenes — like the small kitchen. "We like to boast that we have more degree-trained chefs per square foot than anywhere else in New England," Diemar jokes. That's five chefs in a 20-by-8 foot kitchen. There's also a lack of storage space, which reinforces the commitment to fresh, local food. Even if he wanted to buy in bulk, he'd have nowhere to put it!

Diemar is gratified by the success he has enjoyed, and sounds a bit relieved at the restaurant's return to the basics. When they were considering what to do about the kitchen crunch, "we polled a lot of people in the community," he says. "We found that people like it here for breakfast and lunch, and they like the informal atmosphere. Actually the number one thing is atmosphere, so we're providing what we know people want."

Diemar expects to expand the lunch menu, adding some entrees to the sandwiches, soups and salads. He will also offer entrees in the late afternoon to eat in or take home. "It's only taken us eight years, but we've finally figured out what we want Jack's to be," says Diemar. 

John Walters is a freelance writer; his articles have appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers in the area. He is a former host and anchor at New Hampshire Public Radio. John and his wife own a home in Elkins.

John Gilbert Fox, a freelance photographer, has traveled the world and especially New England to photograph for various publications and institutions. A new book of Fox's New Hampshire photographs with essays by Ernest Hebert is expected later this year.



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