

Internet Restaurant Review Puts the Butts Out



GOING SMOKELESS — Red Arrow Diner owner Carol Isabelle has decided to go entirely smoke-free in her establishment starting May 1st. While some customers are complaining, long time customer and smoker Graydon Erickson, left, says he'll be back every day as usual.

Bob LaPree /Union Leader Staff

Red Arrow Diner Is Going Smokeless To Jeers and Cheers

For the life of me, I can't remember the last time I walked into a diner, grabbed a stool at the counter, turned to the customer next to me and started yakking about a restaurant review I had read on the Internet.

Then again, I'm not **Carol (Lawrence) Isabelle**.

Carol's the owner of the Red Arrow, the venerable diner — we writers always describe the Red Arrow as "venerable" because the word means "worthy of deep respect because of age" — at 61 Lowell St.

Unlike me, Carol does read reviews on the Internet. And she takes them to heart.

So she was really thrilled by one she read recently in



In The City

BY JOHN CLAYTON

"Roadside" magazine, a journal I would describe as being like the Bible of diners, except it is way more important. The review in question centered on the Red Arrow, naturally, and the writer — who also loved Down 'n Dirty Barbecue on Amory Street — had lots of nice things to say about this venerable (see, there's that word again) establishment.

"This cozy little on-site diner was hopping on a late

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Sunday afternoon," the reviewer noted. "Coffee and homemade pie were the orders of the day and the homemade chocolate cream pie polished off the meal just fine. The Red Arrow is a small place in an excellent location in the heart of downtown Manchester..." and it's right about here where things got a little bit dicey for Carol.

"To be honest," the reviewer added — employing a phrase that strikes fear in the heart of any restaurateur — "the cigarette smoke made us less comfortable than we like to be."

And there you have it. An otherwise glowing review sullied by a parting shot that — much like a cigarette — left a sour taste in Carol's mouth.

She knew right then what she had to do.

"Starting May 1," she said, "the Red Arrow is going smokeless."

In the week since she first uttered those words, customers at the Red Arrow have been buzzing like a neon bar sign. There's even talk of a picket line outside her place on Friday. It's hard to find a neutral voice in the joint — even the Swiss cheese is taking sides — and last week, both jeers and cheers rained down on my ears.

Fred Keefe jeered. So did **Rhonda Landry**.

"I don't think it's a good business decision," said Rhonda as she discreetly fired up a Newport Light. "This is a downtown crowd, a lot of them smoke and it's always been a refuge for them."

Tim Roy cheered. So did **Frank**

you have to watch people walk out. I'd just tell her to be patient."

In addition to support, Carol's also winning some begrudging admiration from other competitors, many of whom have wrestled with the same issue.

"I've really been thinking about going smoke-free, but it makes me a little nervous" said **Monte Cossette**, the owner of Kim's Coffee Shop on East Industrial Park Drive. "Where I am, a lot of my customers work at companies that don't allow smoking, so when they come here, it's to have coffee and a smoke. I'd be afraid to lose them."

"I hate smoking," said **Suzanne Grenier** from Suzie Q's on North Main Street, "but I'd guess 85 percent of my customers smoke and they'd go nuts. If everyone had to stop it, it would be great, but if I did it on my own, I'm sure I'd lose a lot of customers to other diners that allow it."

And there is no shortage of diners that do allow smoking, from Mother Goose to Granny's Kitchen and all the places in between, like Pindo's, Chez Vachon, Margie's Dream, Leney's Lunch, Greg's Place and, of course, Shirley D's.

"The difference is Carol doesn't smoke, and I do," said Shirley D's owner **Shirley Fuller**. "All my employees smoke, too. To me, it's to each his own, but I know if I ever did it, I'd lose a lot of business, especially people who want a cigarette with a second cup of coffee while they shoot the baloney."

Skrzysowski.

"It kills me when people say 'The Red Arrow's always had smoking,'" said Frank, a devout non-smoker. "We used to have street cars too, and there was a time when women couldn't vote. Things change."

Some changes are more dramatic than others, of course, and **Douglas Barry**, president of the American Lung Association of New Hampshire, thinks the Red Arrow is right on target. He ranks this change right up there with the biggies.

"You have two old traditions here," he said, "smoking and the American diner. When you think of an American diner, you generally picture people having a cigarette over a cup of coffee. Someday, we'll just picture the cup of coffee, and this is a step in that direction."

And it is a drastic step, as Carol has discovered. Some of her patrons are so mad they're...well, they're smokin'.

"I think they're serious about the picket line and I have customers who won't even talk to me," she said. "They'll say hi to me if I say hello to them, but I'm definitely getting the cold shoulder."

Now, a cold shoulder is fine when you're making a ham sandwich, but not when you're making a momentous decision. Fortunately, Carol's been getting moral support from non-smoking customers, co-workers and surprisingly, from competitors.

"I think it might have been easier for us because we opened smoke-free," said **Andy Statires**, owner of Andy's Place on Cypress Street. "I know it's hard when

Perhaps it's professional courtesy, but most of the local diners are taking a laissez-faire attitude regarding Red Arrow defectors. Then there is Triade's Cafe, the recently opened Wilson Street eatery that is openly courting refugees from the Red Arrow by posting flyers around Lowell Street.

"I don't know if we'll get any of their customers," said owner **Marcia Bailey**, "but they're more than welcome to come here."

Will there be business ramifications for Carol? More than likely. Pro or con? Depends on your source. In the short term, she expects a little dip, but the American Lung Association — which is hardly impartial on this matter — claims restaurants that go non-smoking eventually experience a five to 10 percent jump in business.

Someone once said that smoking is the leading cause of statistics, and Carol keeps a few on hand to support her stance. The most important?

"Only one out of every four people smoke," she said, "and I can't be catering to 25 percent of the population. Plus, we get people tying up booths when they only order a cup of coffee and have three or four cigarettes. I'm in business to sell food, not just coffee, so bottom line, this is a health issue and a business issue."

"A lot of the smokers are saying it won't work and I'll allow smoking again," Carol said, "but I won't do it. I'm sticking to this."

That's her stance. No butts about it.

(John Clayton's In The City column appears every Monday)