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## Celebrating the *Diner*



**MANCHESTER'S RED  
ARROW DINER SERVES UP  
100 YEARS OF HISTORY**

**PLUS A PEEK AT THE MENUS OF  
OTHER AREA DINERS**

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## ON THE COVER

**10 DINERS** The Red Arrow Diner is turning 100! Food writer Matt Ingersoll recently sat down with the Red Arrow's three owners, who reflected on the diner's rich history and lasting legacy as a staple of



Manchester's culinary

scene. Learn about how the Red Arrow began as a tiny lunch cart on Lowell Street in October 1922 and its evolution into a hotspot today for political candidates and local celebrities alike. We've also got the details on a special free 100th anniversary celebration event at the diner on Saturday, Oct. 15. Want more diner eats? We take a look at other area diners serving up the classics.

Levi Letendre (right) owned the diner during the 1970s, then known as Levi's Red Arrow. Photo by Patrick "P.J." Audley, likely taken around 1976 (with added color on the cover).

# Celebrating the Diner



**MANCHESTER'S RED ARROW DINER  
SERVES UP 100 YEARS OF HISTORY  
PLUS A PEEK AT OTHER AREA DINERS**

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A full century after David Lamontagne opened a lunch cart at 61 Lowell St. in Manchester, his legacy as the founder and original owner of the Red Arrow Diner continues to live on. A free outdoor community celebration will take place on Saturday, Oct. 15, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the original Red Arrow — the event will feature samples of a variety of the diner's most iconic dishes for a small fee that will benefit Waypoint New Hampshire, along with raffle prizes, games, music, family-friendly activities and an onsite radio broadcast with DJs Nazy and Marissa of Frank FM.

All year long, to celebrate its 100th year in business, the Red Arrow has been featuring monthly “Diner Dish of the Decade” promotions at each of its four locations, offering special discounts that have corresponded to various menu items that were or became popular during that time. There has also been an ongoing social media campaign highlighting notable moments in the history of Manchester — and the Granite State as a whole — over the past century.

During the block party-style event, Lowell Street between Kosciuszko and Chestnut streets will be closed to traffic. Diner fare is expected to include everything from the Red Arrow’s original “No. 1” hot hamburger sandwich to other eats of yesteryear, like fig squares and coffee Jell-O. American chop suey, tuna rolls and mashed potatoes with gravy will also all be available for sampling.

“The Lamontagne family is coming,” said Carol Lawrence, president and owner of the Red Arrow Diner since 1987. “The quality and the consistency that the Lamontagnes started way back when [is] what we keep striving for. If it wasn’t for them, we wouldn’t be here. ... They are just so happy that it’s still going and still going strong, and I’m very proud of that.”

Throughout the years, the Red Arrow opened and closed multiple locations across the Queen City and other neighboring towns, and has endured everything from devastating fires and wars to, of course, a global pandemic. Here’s a look back on some highlights of the Red Arrow’s rich history that helped shape its now-celebrated status, along with a bonus list of even more southern New Hampshire diners where you can go to satisfy your next comfort food craving.

## Humble beginnings

The year was 1922 — the United States was just four years out of World War I, Prohibition was still in effect nationwide and the stock market crash triggering the Great Depression was still seven years away. David Lamontagne — a French-Canadian immigrant who also happened to have a brief three-year run from 1919 to 1921 as a professional boxer — purchased a small shack at 61 Lowell St. and opened it for business on Oct. 9 as a lunch cart. According to a 2020 Yale University research paper the Red Arrow ownership team provided to the Hippo, student Daniel C. Lu writes that this shack would become the foundation for the Red Arrow Diner.

Lu writes that Lamontagne, who came to Manchester to work for the Amoskeag Manufacturing Co. when he was just 12 years old, eventually quit his job and retired as a boxer to work at the shack full-time, becoming the primary caretaker of his family.

“How he got the name Red Arrow, we think, was because at the time there was a Red Arrow Garage next door to the diner,” said Amanda Wihby, co-owner and chief operating officer since 2020. “That’s ... as far as we can date back to where the name originated from.”

Lamontagne’s lunch cart proved to be a success, as additional locations would quickly follow. A second lunch cart opened at 39 Lake Ave. in 1925, with a third location arriving at 223 Main St. in Nashua by early 1929 — the latter, Lu writes, was home to the first electronic dishwasher that was installed in the city. A fourth spot, then known as Red Arrow Cafe, soon opened at 1195 Elm St. in Manchester, followed by a fifth restaurant, at 16 W. Merrimack St.

Even back then, the Red Arrow was known for being “always open” and “never closed,” an old advertisement dated March 30, 1929, boasts. An old menu from the 1195 Elm St. location that is now framed at the Red Arrow’s corporate office likely dates back to the 1930s, Lawrence said.

Lu writes that, in its very early years, the Red Arrow was best known for its basic American comfort food with a French-Canadian flair. Most of the sandwiches ranged from 10 to 40 cents a la carte, while the higher-end cost for some of the full-service meals — take, for instance, an “evening special” of grilled filet mignon with a fresh mushroom sauce, complete with sides, a vegetable salad and one’s choice of a drink and a dessert — was \$1.25.

“It has always been a pretty big menu, but definitely not as big as it is now,” Lawrence said.

On Nov. 27, 1941, the first of two fires struck the Elm Street restaurant. Lu writes that Lamontagne ended up rebuilding it as a cafeteria, just in time for the United States’ entry into World War II. But a second three-alarm fire on Feb. 15, 1946 — dubbed the “city’s worst accident,” according to the City of Manchester’s website — ultimately destroyed that location.

Instead of rebuilding a second time, Lamontagne decided to open Red Arrow Bakery, which operated at 126 Amory St. on the West Side from 1953 to 1958. Also in the 1950s, Lamontagne was even known to establish and briefly operate his own milk distribution business.

According to a Manchester Union Leader newspaper clipping dated Oct. 2, 1963, Lamontagne sold his successful restaurant chain to University of New Hampshire graduate Kennard H. Lang — just three Red Arrow locations were still open by then, including the one in the original spot at 61 Lowell St. The sale ushered in a new era for the Red Arrow, which would change ownership three more times over the following two decades leading up to Lawrence’s tenure.

## Levi’s Red Arrow

Just as David Lamontagne is cemented in Red Arrow Diner history, so is Levi Letendre, who worked at the restaurant for decades before eventually becoming the third overall owner.

At the very end of 1969, following extensive renovation of the 61 Lowell St. space, Letendre and his son, Mark, purchased and re-opened the restaurant as Levi’s Red Arrow, a newspaper clipping from December of that year shows.

Letendre, who was very well-known and connected across the Queen City, was also a longtime familiar face at the Red Arrow. He originally started working there as a cook in 1945, just after the end of the second World War. He then became a counter man at the diner for many years leading up to his ownership status. By 1978, not long after opening the short-lived Red Arrow Restaurant at 197 Wilson St. in Manchester, Letendre retired, but his son Mark would carry on the diner’s tradition as owner for a few more years. After his father’s death in February 1985, Mark decided to sell — Manchester city directory records and newspaper clippings show that Borrome “Bob” Paquet and Didi Harvey



An early photo of the Red Arrow Diner on Lowell Street in Manchester, which originally opened on Oct. 9, 1922, as a lunch cart. Courtesy photo.

became the Red Arrow's new owners that year.

But this next span of ownership — the fourth overall, and just the third change of hands for the diner in more than six decades up until that point — would prove to be by far the shortest. Even a *Union Leader* story dated Oct. 6, 1986, ran with the ominous headline “Is the Red Arrow Diner history?” after the establishment was allegedly “closed for renovations” for nearly two months. The fifth — and current — leadership team that was established that following year would later prove that, in many ways, the Red Arrow's lasting legacy was still only just beginning.

## National status

Carol Lawrence was just 23 years old when she bought the Red Arrow Diner in September 1987. Growing up in the restaurant business, Lawrence got her start in the industry as a teenager working at Belmont Hall on Grove Street, at the time owned by her father, George.

“I wish that I would've known more about the Red Arrow. ... We even lived way up on the top of Lowell Street, but I never, ever went in there,” she said. “But then, when I was working there, I realized pretty early on how special the Red Arrow was.”

Lawrence recalls primarily working in the kitchen when she first took over. In her earliest days, the Red Arrow wasn't yet back to being open 24 hours a day, either.

“We only opened until 2 [p.m.]. I'd get there at 5 in the morning,” she said. “On the specials board, we would put up these crazy things. Like, we had the hash brown special, which is something we just kind of made up and now it's a staple on the menu. ... Anything on the specials board would sell, and I was just amazed by that. That was how our menu got bigger.”



Manchester's own Adam Sandler (right) poses for a photo during an October 2019 visit to the Red Arrow Diner at 61 Lowell St. Courtesy photo.

A pivotal point in Lawrence's career — and consequently in the overall history of the Red Arrow — came in May 1998 when she decided she was going to go “smoke-free,” an action virtually unheard of in New Hampshire restaurants at the time. Lawrence recalls that everyone, even her own father, a local restaurateur in his own right, thought she was crazy for doing so.

“The smoke in there was horrible,” she said. “We had put in two smoke eaters: one where you first walk in the door right up on the ceiling, and then one toward the back. And I mean, it was yellow in there. I would question certain times taking my own kids in there because the smoke was so bad, and I'm not even a smoker. I never have been.”

Her decision to go smokeless stemmed from a 1998 visit from Randy Garbin, writer for *Roadside Online* and dubbed by Lawrence as a “diner guru.”

“I kind of idolized Randy Garbin ... and next thing you know, I get an email from him saying that he visited the diner. He says, ‘I loved the atmosphere, I loved the staff, the food was great ... but I will tell you I'll never be back.’” Lawrence said. “And I go, ‘Well, what the heck does that mean?’ And he said, ‘Because the smoke was just too bad.’ And, he was kind of promoting smoke-free diners, and then he started sharing statistics with me, we talked a lot and I just thought that all of this totally made sense.”

The move turned out to be the right one — but not without immediate repercussions.

“People were so mad, like, it wasn’t even funny,” she said. “I had threats ... [and] people were picketing in the early hours out front. So many people swore that they would never come back. It was ridiculous. ... But the funny thing was that we started to notice an increase in sales. After a year, I think it was like 19 or 20 percent.”

By September of that year, USA Today, referencing the Red Arrow’s recent switch to going smokeless, named it one of “Top Ten Diners in the Country,” marking one of the first times it was propelled to national prominence. Two years later, in 2000, it was officially named a Manchester city landmark.

As for the Red Arrow’s reputation as a must-visit for political candidates on the campaign trail, Lawrence said that also came into its own during her tenure. This has always been in part due to New Hampshire’s first-in-the-nation primary status, but Lawrence estimates it especially took off around the time of the Merrimack Restaurant’s closure in 2008.

“[The Merrimack Restaurant] was right on the corner of Merrimack and Elm streets,” she said. “All of the political people were going there ... and then when they closed, they just started coming to the Red Arrow, and they’ve been coming ever since.”

Today, patrons at the 61 Lowell St. Red Arrow have included everyone from Presidents Obama, Trump and Biden to various celebrities with local ties, including Sarah Silverman, Seth Meyers and, of course, Adam Sandler, who used to frequent the diner with his dad.

## The tradition continues

By the mid-2000s, George Lawrence retired as owner of Belmont Hall, selling it to his daughter — and Carol’s sister — Cathy, and dividing his time between New Hampshire and Florida.

“He says, ‘I’m sick and tired of riding a golf cart down in Florida. Let’s open another Red Arrow,’” Carol Lawrence said, “and that was how we bought Milford.”

On the Milford Oval, the Red Arrow operated from October 2008 to its closure in late 2019. A third location would open in February 2015 in Londonderry — Wihby noted that’s where all of the diner’s scratch-made desserts are now prepared — followed by a fourth, in Concord, in the summer of 2017. In early May 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Red Arrow opened its largest spot in Nashua in the site of a former Friendly’s restaurant. Taking advantage of the onsite drive-thru window, this location started operating on a takeout-only model. Even today, all four Red Arrow Diners continue to utilize online ordering, a revenue stream Lawrence never thought they would have or benefit from.

One hundred years strong, the original site of the Red Arrow Diner at 61 Lowell St. may have undergone numerous changes, but Lawrence said there’s one important factor that has remained the same. It has not only kept the Red Arrow alive and kicking, but remains a staple for diners both across New Hampshire and the United States.

“Anywhere you go, the diner is the focal point of the community,” she said. “You get all walks of life that come in. You can sit there and be next to a city worker or a lawyer, and then there’s a doctor over there. ... You just get to talk to such a variety of people.”

*Mya Blanchard contributed to this story.* 🍷

## Red Arrow Diner's 100th anniversary celebration event

**When:** Saturday, Oct. 15, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. *Lowell Street, between Kosciuszko and Chestnut streets, will be closed to traffic for the duration of the event. Additionally, all four Red Arrow Diner locations in Manchester, Concord, Londonderry and Nashua will be closed to allow employees to attend. All ticket sale proceeds will benefit Waypoint New Hampshire.*

**Where:** 61 Lowell St., Manchester

**Cost:** Admission is free; attendees interested in sampling food must purchase a ticket for \$5. Sampling tickets are available online through Oct. 10

**Visit:** [redarrowdiner.com/100](http://redarrowdiner.com/100)

## More nostalgic eats at NH's diners

*In addition to the iconic Red Arrow Diner, New Hampshire offers diner fans several places to stop for a cup of coffee and a classic meal. Here are some of the diners across southern New Hampshire, focusing on the establishments with the word "diner" in their name. Do you know of a diner in the Manchester, Nashua or Concord areas that isn't on this list? Let us know at [food@hippopress.com](mailto:food@hippopress.com).*

### **The Red Arrow Diner**

*61 Lowell St., Manchester, 626-1118; 137 Rockingham Road, Londonderry, 552-3091; 112 Loudon Road, Concord, 415-0444; 149 Daniel Webster Hwy., Nashua, 204-5088; [redarrowdiner.com](http://redarrowdiner.com)*

**Hours:** According to its website, the Manchester location is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Londonderry and Nashua

locations are open daily, 5:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. The Concord location is open Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, 5:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., and Friday and Saturday, 5:30 a.m. to midnight (temporarily closed on Mondays).

Established in Manchester in October 1922, The Red Arrow Diner is now an institution that reaches visitors far beyond the Granite State. For decades, it's been known as a popular campaign stop for presidential candidates and other politicians. In 2000 it was named a city landmark.

**Specialty of The House:** The Red Arrow is known for its weekly Blue Plate specials, featuring home-cooked items like pork pie, lasagna, meat loaf, haddock and more.

**Most Decadent Dessert:** Freshly baked desserts are available all day long. Options include whoopie pies, cheesecakes, fruit pies, double layer cakes and Dinah fingers (think Twinkies).