



## POLITICS

# The Diner That Every Future President Must Visit

New Hampshire's Red Arrow Diner is the one thing all sides — whether Democrat, Republican, or independent — can agree on

by [Gary He](#) | Jan 30, 2020, 2:50pm EST

Photos by [Gary He](#)

Over the course of a two-year presidential campaign, a candidate will visit hundreds of restaurants as they try to convincingly demonstrate that they're just like the rest of us — and that they deserve our vote. Most restaurants are lucky to see a single presidential hopeful even once, a fly-by-night celebrity doling out an even more fleeting brush with fame. Some, however, become fixtures of the trail: In Iowa, the Western-themed Pizza Ranch, a regional pizza chain that says its goal is to “to glorify God by positively impacting the world we live in,” is a Republican favorite, while it's difficult to find a Democrat who would turn down a visit to Iowa City's Hamburg Inn No. 2 for one of its pie shakes.

The ne plus ultra of campaign trail restaurants, visited without fail election cycle after election cycle by

Democrat, Republican, and third-party candidates alike, is the Red Arrow Diner, a century-old, 24-hour diner in Manchester, New Hampshire. A political consultant could not imagine a better stage for the practice of person-to-person politicking: The Red Arrow boasts a diverse cast of regulars; its walls are lined with decades' worth of newspaper clippings and photographs of famous customers, including hometown hero Adam Sandler; and its menu is uncut Americana, with dozens of items, from diner classics like hot turkey sandwiches or steak and eggs to more outré fare, like a mug filled with 20 strips of bacon.



A mug with bacon strips | Gary He/Eater



The Newton Burger, which is now called the Trump Tower Burger

New Hampshire's primary is the first in the nation, just days after the Iowa caucuses, and its voters place a premium on "retail politics" — the standard baby-kissing, glad-handing, flesh-pressing, and earnest head-nodding that are the foundation of a politician's rapport with voters. As the premiere venue for crowd-working in New Hampshire's most populous city, the Red Arrow occupies an outsized place in Granite State electoral politics — it has been a *Jeopardy!* clue — and it plays its part eagerly. "Would you like to schedule a political visit?" the top of its website beckons, while dozens of presidential hopefuls gaze down on patrons from the walls. Al Gore, Hillary Clinton, Ben Carson, Barack Obama, John Kasich, Ted Cruz, John Edwards, and Donald Trump can be seen in a single glance.



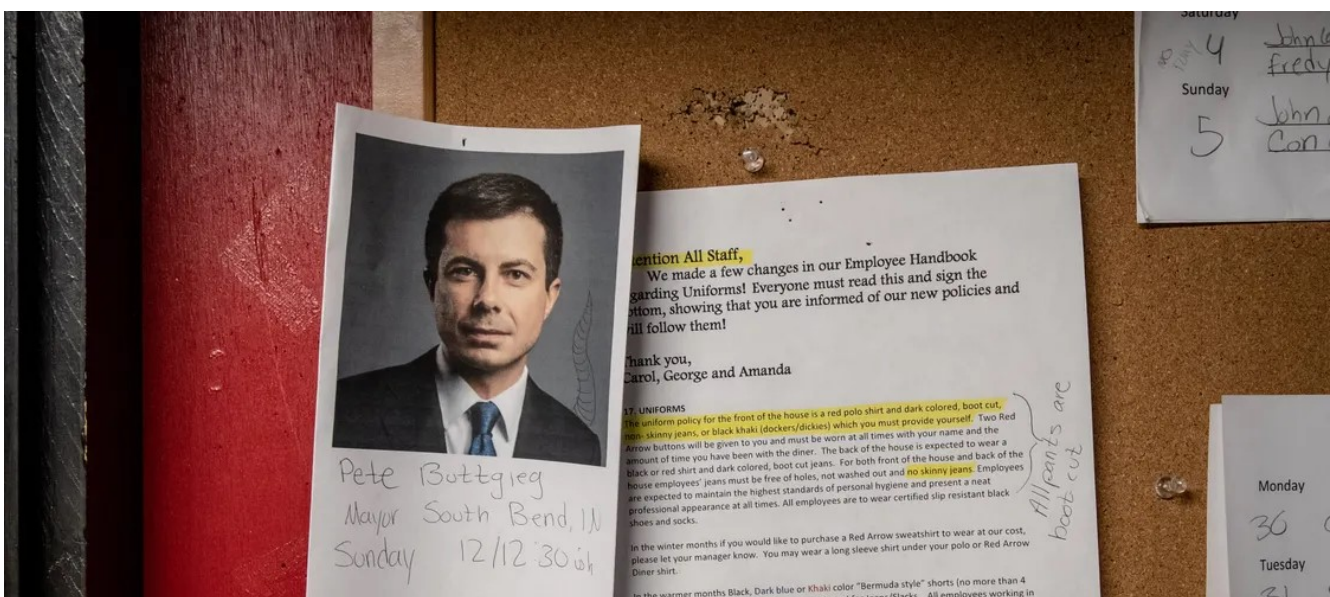


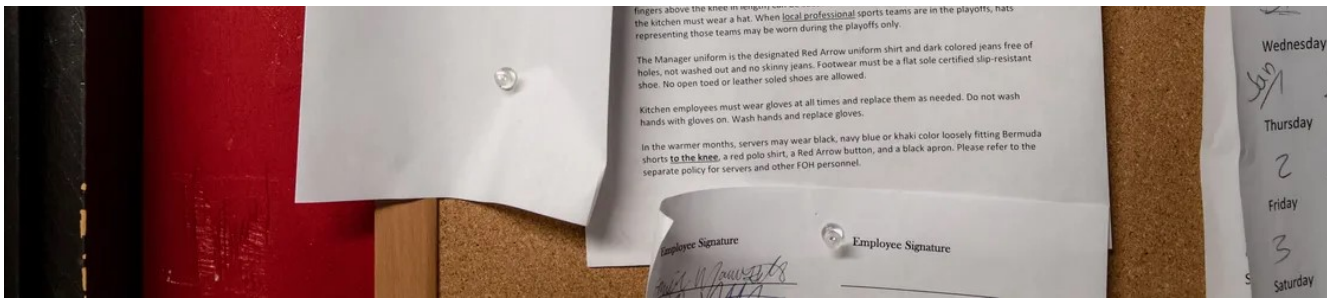


Presidential-level guests adorn the walls: Clinton, Gore, Obama, Trump, and Fieri.

Even Trump, whose 2016 campaign was marked by its **near-total rejection of traditional retail politics** in favor of **mass rallies**, could not avoid a visit to the Red Arrow — which has since rebranded its most gluttonous creation, the Newton Burger, which consists of a half-pound of ground beef, a deep-fried ball of mac and cheese, and two slices of melted American cheese, all wedged between two whole grilled cheese sandwiches that serve as the bun, as the Trump Tower Burger. As the **Associated Press once put it**, “It may not be spelled out in the Constitution, but the simple fact of the matter is, you really can’t run for president without grabbing some grub at the Red Arrow Diner.”

The origins of a surprising number of modern-day campaign conventions can be found in the 1992 Clinton campaign. While many paths to the White House begin in Iowa, the New Hampshire primary proved just as pivotal. Clinton’s strategy of getting personal with voters at diners across the state, including the Red Arrow, is credited for his subsequent second-place finish in the state primary — branding him as the “Comeback Kid” and propelling him to the nomination, then, ultimately, the presidency. Gore campaign operatives continued the tradition in 2000, officially making the Red Arrow an institution, and by the 2008 election cycle, it had become a must-stop for both Democrats and Republicans.





A sign announcing Buttigieg's arrival on the staff bulletin board

On a recent Sunday morning, a photo of Pete Buttigieg, the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, was pinned up on a bulletin board in the basement; an employee had vandalized it with a scribbled-on tail. The increasingly embattled presidential candidate was criss-crossing New Hampshire on a four-day tour, his 15th visit to the state. He was scheduled to drop by the Red Arrow shortly before noon — during the peak brunch rush — for an off-the-record visit, or an OTR. The appearance, like most OTRs, was not on the official event schedule that was released to the public or the press, but the staff was abuzz with news of the visit.

“I’m excited to meet Pete!” said server Ashley Chapdelaine, who recently turned 19 and will be voting in a presidential election for the first time this year.

“Is there a plan?” asked Emilia Morrisette, another server, as she looked at her boss nervously.

“Same as always,” said general manager Jamie Lemay, who has been working at the Red Arrow for eight years, through multiple election cycles. “There is no plan.”







The mid-morning buzz during a Sunday brunch service

By mid-morning, the restaurant was humming along: completely packed, with servers rotating families in and out of the five booths at the front of the restaurant, seating everyone else at the 15-seat counter. In the kitchen, “Hungry Eyes” blasted over the stereo system as three line cooks prepared blueberry pancakes and omelets for the Sunday-morning crowd. Lemay checked her watch as she stood near the kitchen doorway. It was after 11, and there was still no contact from the campaign.

At 11:07, the Buttigieg advance team walked through the door: Eugene Chow, the deputy communications director for New Hampshire, and Dan Zotos, the campaign’s New Hampshire political director. The two briefed Lemay on how everything would go down: handshakes, lunch, photographs, in that order.

Servers who had been smoothly serving customers just minutes before stiffened up as the dance of turning tables now needed to accommodate Buttigieg, while the kitchen found itself in the weeds with 12 takeout orders for the campaign staff. As three sets of cameras and additional campaign staff materialized, guests realized that something was afoot. Conversation faded to a murmur and every pair of eyes in the room fixed itself on the doorway.



General Manager Jamie Lemay checks the time while waiting for Buttigieg’s arrival.



Cook John Heward is in the weeds.

Minutes later, Buttigieg burst through the door and hugged the two local activists he was there to dine with. The silence broke and normal conversation resumed; the anticipation, it seems, was more exciting than the actual presence of a presidential candidate. Even as Buttigieg worked his way down the counter to shake

hands, diners' attention never quite returned, save for Donna Shindelman. The health care worker and lifelong Democrat from Reading, Massachusetts, asked for a photo, proudly stating that she'd be voting for Buttigieg in the Massachusetts primary on Super Tuesday.

Buttigieg sat down with a mug of black coffee and ordered a chicken-fried steak Benedict, slathering it with Sriracha after his first bite; he leaned heavily into the plate to protect his trademark ensemble of a white dress shirt with blue tie. Halfway through the meal, a server rang a bell to announce that everyone was in the presence of a Red Arrow virgin, the traditional welcome for first-timers to the restaurant (**Hillary Clinton excepted**). Presented with stickers that declared "I've Been De-virginized at the Red Arrow Diner," Buttigieg gamely slapped one onto his chest.



After signing some mugs and taking a few more photos, about 40 minutes after he arrived, Buttigieg was gone. Lemay, the general manager, breathed a sigh of relief. "That was a long time," she said. According to her, most visits last around 10 minutes and are purely for the upfront photo op. Few candidates stay long enough to squeeze past the counter for facetime with the kitchen staff, and Buttigieg had made the rare move of concluding his visit by taking photos with the back of house.

"Knowing that someone like that was in the restaurant is pretty cool," said Conor Trumble, who has been a cook at the Red Arrow for 10 years and was thrilled to meet the candidate. "I'm voting for Buttigieg," said



Trumble. “And my girlfriend is as well.”

John Heward, another cook, who has been working at the Red Arrow on and off for 20 years, had a different point of view. “I’d rather be cooking for Trump!” ■

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