



The road to the White House begins in a century-old coffee shop in the northern United States

Dozens of photographs of politicians remind visitors that the Red Arrow Diner in Manchester, New Hampshire, is no ordinary neighborhood restaurant. The small establishment takes center stage every election cycle and becomes an obligatory stop for every aspiring U.S. president.

March 19, 2024

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Over the years, the Red Arrow Diner has become a must-stop for presidential candidates participating in the New Hampshire primary, which traditionally opens the U.S. election cycle every four years. Photo: Salomé Ramírez / Yeny García (VOA)

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MANCHESTER, USA —The Red Arrow Diner occupies just a small corner of Manchester, New Hampshire. In this northeastern U.S. state, which prides itself on [kicking off the nation's presidential primaries](#) every election cycle, the iconic family-run restaurant serves an essential function: testing each candidate with "tough questions" before the rest of the nation.

Few ordinary Americans can say they've had breakfast with Barack Obama or Donald Trump, while chatting with them about their policy platforms... except if you're a regular at the Red Arrow. On the bar of this century-old establishment you can see the plaques that mark the visits of prominent politicians and personalities, who fill the small space of the *diner* every four years.



"The road to the White House actually goes through that door over there," Red Arrow co-owner Amanda Wihby proudly told *VOA*, pointing to the narrow, photograph-covered hallway that greets customers as soon as they enter the store. Almost "every president in modern history has come here before he was president."

| Retail Policy on the Menu

For more than 100 years, the Red Arrow has served traditional American dishes, pancakes, egg and bacon, with a bonus of what the country calls "*retail politics*." In this style of campaigning, politicians rub shoulders with their constituents in a close way, as they explain their platform and try to win votes in an experience that could hardly be repeated on stage in front of hundreds of people.



Amanda Wihby, co-owner of the Red Arrow Diner, says the energy at the establishment during the primaries is something she "can't explain." Every four years "we have a front-row seat to democracy," he told *VOA*.

This, along with burgers, milkshakes and the popular *hashbrowns*, is the specialty of the neighborhood restaurant. "As you can see, there's a very tight space here. So it's a great place for people to vet candidates, something we take very seriously here in New Hampshire. We've been doing it for more than 100 years," Wihby insisted.

"Candidates really come here because they can meet and greet their entire constituency base. It's a great time for them to really win their vote, a great time for people who are not sure, to be able to see their candidate in the place where they can ask questions and get the answers they are looking for," explained the director of operations, who also manages other subsidiaries in nearby cities in the interior of the state.



The century-old Red Arrow Diner serves typical American fare 24 hours a day. Its menu has barely changed since its opening in 1922 in Manchester, New Hampshire.

New Hampshire, which proudly defends the privilege – enshrined in its state constitution – of hosting "the inaugural primary of the nation" since 1920, is very serious about setting the trend for what will be the rest of the voting to choose the nominee of each party, ahead of the presidential elections in November. The Red Arrow Diner is no different.

"We feel like we're doing a job for the country. It's not just for New Hampshire. It's something that we're taking very seriously in hopes that we can get those (candidates') responses out there for other people to share," Wihby said.

| **Front-row seat to democracy**

The decision of Democratic President Joe Biden, who is running for re-election this year, and the Democratic National Committee, to break with tradition and officially begin *the party's primaries in South Carolina*, a closer reflection of the diverse and real America, was not well received in the wealthy northeastern state. The territory defied the decision, and despite facing sanctions, held a vote where *Biden won in a campaign of hand-inscribing* his name on the ballot.



The day-to-day atmosphere at the Red Arrow Diner changes during primary season, when the small establishment is filled with voters, candidates, and press.

When asked why New Hampshire considers it so important to retain this privilege, the Red Arrow responds that no one "pressures" candidates like they do. "Because here we force grassroots politics: you have to talk, you have to go out and you have to shake hands, you have to talk to us, we want to ask you the hard questions. Something that doesn't happen in South Carolina or the other states, where there are bigger crowds."

For Wihby, it is important to highlight the uniqueness of these circumstances. "You really can't get this anywhere else," he said to affirmative movements from customers from the nearby sidewalks.



For more than 100 years, the Red Arrow has served traditional American dishes, pancakes, egg and bacon, with a bonus of what the country calls "retail policy."

"Here we have a front-row seat to democracy. And I think employees and staff don't take that for granted. We enjoyed it. We get soaked every four years. And it's something I hope will continue. We're ready for the next one," he said.

Presidents, senators, governors... and Kevin Costner

From the walls of the Red Arrow in Manchester, dozens of politicians and well-known names such as Bill and Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Ron DeSantis, Chris Christie, Donald Trump and Nikki Haley greet the visitor smiling.

At the bar you can look for the plaque that marks the place where the politicians sat and even order the Trump Tower Burger, one of their traditional dishes renamed during the visit of the former president and now the leading Republican candidate in these presidential elections.



The walls of the original location of the Red Arrow Diner in Manchester, New Hampshire, are filled with photographs reminiscent of visits by politicians and personalities. Actor Adam Sandler (pictured right) is one of the establishment's famous local patrons.

It's not just politicians on the campaign trail who make their way to the Red Arrow Diner. For employees, it's normal to see actor and comedian Adam Sandler, who frequents the cafeteria beyond his importance in local politics and whose photo also hangs next to those of other personalities. Sandler grew up in Manchester, and for him, as for hundreds of thousands of others, the *diner* is a local tradition.

During a normal day, the atmosphere at the *diner* - which serves food 24 hours a day - is the usual one of any neighborhood establishment, however, everything changes every four years. The Red Arrow becomes a meeting point for the crowd, filled with press and voters eager to meet and talk to White House hopefuls, whether or not they have a real chance.



The emblematic Red Arrow Diner renamed one of its burgers in honor of former U.S. President Donald Trump's visit to the cafeteria.

"People get very excited and the energy is high. (...) They come from all over to be able to meet and greet the candidates. These primaries were sitting here expectantly: who's coming? Who's coming?" recalled Wihby, who "reserves his political preferences" to make each visitor feel at home.

The co-owner of Red Arrow remembers with particular intensity the 2016 primaries, where there was no president seeking re-election and the candidates really took to the streets to publicize their platforms and seek votes.



Photo Gallery

In Photos I The Red Arrow Diner, a must-stop for candidates for the presidency of the United States

Red Arrow Diner (Cortesia)

"It was crazy. We had so many candidates who came through here. There were people standing at the bar and outside in cars. It was really intense and people had an energy that I can't explain," he said.

Wihby, however, has a very special memory of that election cycle that makes her leave the neutral position of hostess: the visit of one of her favorite actors and of an entire generation, Kevin Costner.


"That's my number one memory, because I was there during the primaries and they said, 'Oh, Kevin Costner is on his way. And I said, is that a code? Because I really didn't think it was him. (...) And yes, he came and spent a couple of hours here. That was an unbelievable moment for all of us," he says with a smile as an image of Costner comes back to him from the wall.

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