

At Plainfield's Celebrated Breakfast Spots, The Morning Repast Seeks a Future

by Ricka McNaughton

For certain people, commercial griddle smells and brewing coffee aromas in the morning serve to electrify a primal pleasure center lodged deep in the modern brain—especially in the fall. Perhaps there was some ancient, evolutionary advantage to this, wherein such humans first saw the necessity to invent civilization as a means to go out for great breakfast food and complain about politicians. For decades, little Plainfield, Vermont boasted not one but two small jewels in the crown of modern breakfast civilization. It's turning out to be a year of transition for both of them.

The **Maple Valley Café & Gift Shop** sits on the busy Route 2 corridor at the eastern edge of town. It captures its share of drive-by business, but the place is also a treasured community table that draws regulars from many surrounding towns—including Barre and Montpelier. Owners Janet and Dudley Askew operate the café six days a week from around May through late December. They take a winter respite in Florida each year, which no one at Maple Valley begrudges them.

It's now a fall weekday morning, and breakfasters Diane Tretreault of Plainfield and Annie Reed of Marshfield are here at Maple Valley.

Would you call yourselves regulars? "Oh yes. You may call us the 'irregulars.'" "We've been coming here quite a while." "We even created our own breakfast sandwich."

"It's called the McAnnie. It's an English muffin with egg, cheddar cheese, salsa, jalapeño and onion..."

Customer creativity is welcome here. But consistency matters too. Looking at a long-time customer's order, Dudley can sometimes spot a missing ingredient and will consult the customer. Forehead slap. *Ob boy, yes. That's what I meant to order.*

Dudley explained, "When we first opened



Diners Diane Tretreault, left, and Annie Reed are served by Sharon O'Connor, who worked at Maple Valley Café for many years, had four kids, and returned to help out recently. Photo by Ricka McNaughton.

24 years ago, people weren't in such a hurry. As eating habits changed, we began fitting breakfast sandwiches into the menu." Dudley and Janet try to incorporate as much fresh, local and organic food into their menu items as possible.

Janet adds, "There is so much we cater to now just in terms of food allergies . . . and health issues." They even do, for example, gluten-free buckwheat pancakes. A carnivore can expect meat; for a carni-don't, there's tofu.

Janet's fresh baked goods are also for sale out front. Besides sandwiches, other menu choices include omelets to order, waffles, pancakes, French toast and granola. There's

a long list of fruit and coffee smoothies.

Blackberry Bongo features blackberries, bananas, vanilla ice cream and orange juice. Holier Than Thou is decaf espresso, iced decaf coffee and vanilla ice cream. To lay on the caf, order a Shakin' Salvation.

But despite the McRush that breakfast has become for many, a lot of lingering by design happens here. Filling out a table in the corner is a group of women clearly doing that. They are Jean Lathrop, Peggy Bresee, Betsy Chodorkoff, Chloe Pitkin and Molly Pitkin. A few of the regulars didn't make it today. They claim to be, at times, a raucous bunch.

"If nothing else, you know that on Thurs-

day you're guaranteed to laugh out loud."

"Many of us only see each other here." "Sometimes we don't leave until they start serving lunch."

"We love Janet and Dudley."

"For us to come here together like this every week . . . it's such a gift."

There don't seem to be as many guys here at this hour.

"Well, you missed the men's tractor table. They're here at 6 a.m."

"I think they all have the same kind of tractors."

"Actually, we've just been talking about riding our lawn mowers to Maine for a vacation."

"There's a film, isn't there, about a guy who did that?"

"But I only have a push mower . . ."

"Don't worry. We'll tow you when you get tired."

When Janet and Dudley pick a date to close down as usual in December, people adapt, but they don't want to. What's worse this year, as many people realize by now, is that the Maple Valley Café & Gift Shop is up for sale. However, the Askews say they are going slow; they just started a process they hope will lead to a smooth handoff to a new owner in due time. This season . . . next season . . . until the business sells, it's business as usual.

They'd be pleased if the place sold to an energetic young couple with children, as they were when they started out. Enjoy what's here while you can. And hope for some like-minded buyers who prove as evolved and graciously adaptive to their customers as the Askews have been.

Maple Valley Café & Gift Shop is located on Route 2 across from Tim's Convenience Store (454-8626). Doors are open for breakfast and lunch from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., except Wednesdays. There's a small gift shop where customers tend to buzz around murmuring, "Mmm . . . hey . . . come look at this." The merchandise here is not your everyday road-

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side claptrap for tourists, and it includes some charming toys. If you bring children old enough to talk, know that there will be begging.

The story of **Tasca** in Plainfield village has a prequel. The restaurant formerly known as River Run recently ended a nearly two-decade run. At any given table in its packed heyday, there might be farmers and artists; loggers and lawyers; business people and bureaucrats; authors of great and small renown; flatlanders and natives; people dedicated to saving the planet, and people on their own planets. All played well together in this small, shabby-chic setting without a pretension in the world. The meals were tasty and generous. Breakfast included such novelties for northern palates as fragrant bowls of gumbo and southern fried

catfish. To the amusement of many locals, the *New York Times* caught wind of this place, as did *Food & Wine* and *USA Today*.

River Run had an especially devoted group of early morning gatherers. But then came an unfortunate series of breakfast-changing events. Here's a highly compressed version that leaves out much: Earlier this year, newcomer Ignacio Ruiz bought the business from long-time owner/chef Jimmy Kennedy. Ignacio introduced food with an enticing European-Spanish influence. Jimmy stayed on as a cook for a while, at least between fishing tournaments. Then one day, wham. The River Run sign came down and a "Tasca" sign went up. And while dinner lived on, Ignacio said *adios* to breakfast. Jimmy reportedly had other fish to fry but arranged to cook a final, farewell feed for the dispossessed morning crowd this past August.

Then very recently, the posted hours on Tasca's door changed. They are serving brunch now from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. Managing chef Josh Pitts explained honestly, "We're feeling our way. We haven't really made a strong effort yet to reach out and let people know about the new brunch hours."

Is now a good time to let them know?
"Yes."

On a recent Sunday morning in Tasca's kitchen, Josh and sous-chef Suri Weinmuson fielded brunch orders. Both are River Run alums. French toast seemed to be the pick of the hour. It was early yet.

Josh said, "I'd really like people to know about our *churros con chocolate*. These are deep-fried little pastries that come with a thick chocolate sauce. You get a big dish of them for just \$3. You dip the pastries in the chocolate . . . just like you would French fries in ketchup." You'll need at least one friend to help finish a serving of these light, sugary confections.

Josh estimated that the brunch menu splits out 50/50 between American and Spanish fare. Besides churros, a few compelling new offers include eggs benedict with serrano, a fine dry-cured Spanish ham and hollandaise sauce; and *buevos mollets*,



Tasca's managing Chef Josh Pitts demonstrates how to eat churros con chocolate, a Spanish pastry with a thick chocolate dipping sauce. Photo by Ricka McNaughton.

which are poached eggs with smoked salmon on fried potatoes, covered in smoked paprika béchamel with a caper relish garnish.

Could some of River Run's former star power help push Tasca forward? Will central Vermont chocoholics swoon for churros in the morning? What will become of an endangered species of early morning diners-

out in Plainfield, as their feeding grounds shrink to a small patch of weekend brunch this winter?

It's all on the table. Tasca (65 Main St, Plainfield; 454-1246) currently serves brunch and dinner. For menu and hours, check Tasca's website at plainfieldtasca.com.



Standing Hospitality in Plainfield

Say you just want to grab an early morning coffee and a little sustenance, find out what happened in the night, if anything, and briefly make your opinions known on matters of the day. Plainfield has two places that fill the bill well.

Tim's Convenience Store (Tim and Val Roberts, owners) on Route 2 at the eastern edge of Plainfield is a big morning coffee mecca serving Vermont coffee blends, hot breakfast sandwiches made onsite, and good fresh muffins. Standing room only.

The Red Store (Sue Remington, owner) on Route 2, a skip from the Plainfield Post Office on the opposite side of the road, provides a side room where people like to do a little morning conferencing. It's slightly bigger than the picnic table placed there for customers to lean their elbows on. Serve yourself.

—Ricka McNaughton



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