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JAX At The Tracks – A Bicoastal American Classic

Sept. 10, 2009 (Truckee, Calif.) – From its roots as a circa 1940s suburban Philadelphia mainstay to its modern day incarnation in a western mountain resort town, JAX At The Tracks stays true to the classic American diner philosophy of honest food served in a friendly atmosphere.

In 1992, successful San Francisco restaurant entrepreneur Robert Carey decided that the Sierra Nevada town of Truckee, Calif., where he owned a second home, was ripe for a restaurant that offered great food at affordable prices.

“There just wasn’t anything available in Truckee at the time,” Carey explains. “Then I thought: ‘let’s bring a classic American diner to Truckee.’ I always say there are no accidents and on the very same day I picked up the *Wall Street Journal* and read an article about a man who was saving these historic diners from the wrecking ball.”

After much research, Carey found the Birmingham Grille, a 1948 Kullman diner that was for sale outside of Philly.

“It was in really sad shape – sitting on blocks,” Carey recalls. “But it was the right vintage so I put a deposit on it.”

Next on Carey’s to-do list was to figure out how to move the vintage diner 3,600 miles to its new West Coast home.

“No one had a truck that was big enough to haul it,” he remembers. “I even called NASA! Eventually I found out there were only two companies in the U.S. that had trucks that were big enough to do the job.”

A company in Louisville, Kentucky was contracted for the job. It took a crew of Amish house movers five hours to load the diner onto the truck’s flatbed.

“I remember thinking I hope this truck can hold it because I don’t have any other options,” Carey says.

The two-week cross-country sojourn turned into a month ordeal when a permitting snafu changed the game plan. Pennsylvania highway officials impounded the entire rig.

“The diner went to jail essentially,” Carey says.

Eventually the diner was delivered to its new Truckee home. Carey and his son Andy took on the task of the meticulous 1.2 million restoration. On Dec. 6, 1995 Andy’s Truckee Diner opened its doors for business.

Armed with big city culinary experience, Andy oversaw the diner for several years. Eventually, Andy needed to attend to family matters in the Bay Area and decided to lease out the business. During this interlude, the diner temporarily lost its soul.

In yet another incarnation, Bob Carey met up with Bud Haley, a Bay Area restaurant and gourmet market executive who had moved his family to Tahoe. Haley purchased the business and quickly rallied a crew of passionate culinary professionals who shared his vision.

“We care about the food, but what we really care about is the people,” Haley says. “There will always be a place for that no matter what. The diner flourished during the Depression and we plan to see JAX flourish now – I believe classic Americana will never go out of style.”

Indeed, the classic American diner represents a bygone era filled with down-to-earth values that people still crave. Manufactured in factories and often modeled after railroad dining cars, diners became popular in the Depression because they offered affordable fare. After WW II this demand increased as servicemen came home eager to make up for their years of army grub. As the population shifted from the cities to the suburbs the look of diners began to change. Diners – like JAX – were made with stylish glass-like porcelain enamel (embedded with graphic logos), stainless steel exteriors and large windows that attracted passing motorists.

Diners flourished into the late 1950s. In the 1960s diners started to lose their popularity as new fast food joints made the scene. During its heyday, there were some 4,000 diners in the U.S. Today there are only about 1,000 in existence.

Though suburban Philadelphia is a lifetime away from Truckee, Calif, there remains bi-coastal nostalgic links. A few years ago a Bay Area woman wrote Andy Carey. Purely by happenstance the woman had stopped into the diner on a weekend trip and was flooded with precious childhood memories. Her father used to take her to the Birmingham Grille in West Chester, Penn. when she was a child. Today the woman returns each year to the diner in its West Coast home to pay tribute to her father and her long ago childhood.

JAX is located “At The Tracks” at 10144 West River St. in historic downtown Truckee, Calif. JAX is open seven days a week from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. serving breakfast, lunch and dinner. For more information call 530-550-7450. Or log-on to www.jaxtruckee.com

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