

## Farewell to An Albany Icon

Published by Metroland, February 16, 2012

Last Wednesday morning, the Miss Albany Diner was two days shy of closing—and slammed. People packed in like sardines at the counter, and the wait staff steered plates around winter coats that puffed out from the coat hooks between each booth. The corned-beef hash was sold out forever, and my sister got one of the last servings of MAD French toast. The menus were vanishing as souvenirs.



*Photos by Julia Zave*

Who knew this era would ever end? This is where UAlbany students learned to drink coffee light and sweet. Where new Albanians discovered a sense of community as they follow online recommendations to great food. Where Meryl Streep, in character for the movie *Ironweed*, couldn't eat her toast. The Miss Albany was a time machine that foisted you right in the present moment, up against pure strangers at the counter but able to bridge that human gap in the capable open hands of the Brown family—Cliff and Jane, and their son Bill.

The family had tried to sell the business for the last five years, and had been entertaining the thought of selling for much longer. Cliff passed away on Nov. 1, 2010, but the right buyer didn't surface until recently.

“People would come in and say, ‘Oh, I think it would be great to have a restaurant. Are you interested in selling?’ ” Jane said Monday during an interview at the Illium Café in Troy. “You can tell they have no idea how to run a restaurant at all. They’re attracted to the glamour of it.”

That glamour includes clearing stuck drains and taking out the trash because it is your place, almost a home, and you can’t hire people to do every single job in the joint. The economics of food service don’t work that way.

The family didn’t want to sell the diner to just anybody. Fortunately, two good candidates to buy the building appeared at about the same time: local restaurateur Matt Baumgartner, and someone from out of town who wanted to turn it into a hamburger and frozen-custard place. Both of these options seemed viable, but the local option won out. Baumgartner bought the building, though not the business.

Baumgartner, who also owns Bombers and Wolff’s Biergarten, and his partners are focusing their energy on the Olde English Pub, which they recently opened down the street at Quackenbush Square, and don’t yet have plans for the building. But rumors that they will tear it down, Baumgartner assures, are unfounded.

“We would never do that,” Baumgartner says. “We bought the building because we love the diner and the history that comes along with it.” Loyal customers wanted the Miss Albany to live on in its next incarnation, but the Browns hold title to the recipes and name.

“We had our chance to do what we wanted to do,” Bill says. “He deserves the chance to do what he wants to do.”

“I’ve been grinning since we sold it February first,” Jane says, ordering an asparagus omelet with spinach at the Illium.



The Browns bought the Miss Albany Diner in 1988, shortly after it was restored for the filming of *Ironweed* (the filmmakers actually gave it its name, based on a onetime chain of local diners). The diner itself dates back to 1941, when it was erected and operated for many years as Lil's Diner by owner Lil McCauliff. When the Browns reopened the diner in the late '80s, they got a lot of customers from the neighborhood, day laborers who were used to the way the previous owners had it set up, so they could get in and out on a half-hour lunch break. But as the Browns introduced the new menu, a different sort of person began frequenting, someone on salary who had a whole hour for lunch. People heard that the menu was good, and unusual; and gradually, a whole new crowd began to fill the diner.

Many people were loyal in their attendance, or loyal for a certain period of time.

"Life is what happens to people, so we had many regulars who stopped being regulars because the circumstances of their life changed," Bill says.

"Students came in and out, people got jobs. Some people, their circumstances never change, and a lot of these regulars became personal friends."

Now, Bill and Jane get a chance to explore friendships outside of the place where we know them best. Their first stop is a visit with Jane's daughter/ Bill's sister in Kansas, and then on to Colorado to visit a 1-month-old great grandson/nephew. Jane looks forward to more traveling and spending more time doing voice-overs, which she's been doing the last 12 years.

Writing figures in Bill's plans; he has a degree in journalism from Seattle University. When he graduated, the economic climate in Seattle was dismal, and blog writing was just starting to explode, diminishing his chance of earning a living writing about food. He came home in 2003 and was happy to have a job waiting for him.

"I absolutely love to cook. I love writing and I love food," he says. "I want to find a way to combine the two, because there's endless possibilities to be creative in both things."

Bill Brown also wants to spend a year cooking in France, developing his techniques. Last summer, when the diner closed for two weeks, Bill worked a day at a restaurant he loves, the Gotham Bar and Grill. Staging (working a day for free in a restaurant) in that three-star environment was a dream for him, and he would have done it for a full week if he could have. He loved the food that came out of such a team effort, whole crews of prep people readying ingredients for grand presentation.

Where Bill hopes to land will include both kitchen and desk. At some point, he and Jane will build the Miss Albany Diner cookbook. From this future reader's point of view, that book should try to capture not just the recipes, but also the sense of the place, a sense informed by Miss Albany Diner's social architect, Cliff Brown.

Cliff loved diners, and he poured that love into Miss Albany. Securing classic diner fixtures to touches that were not so standard, such as the foam French fries on the ceiling (for customers to select their preferred

degree of doneness), Cliff invested himself deeply. Ask about the ingredients, and he'd give a treatise on Rhode Island coffee syrup, or the difficulty of procuring bangers and crumpets.

More important than these elements, though, was the idea of what the space should be.

“My father never looked down on anybody, and never was awed by anybody,” Bill says. “He treated everybody with respect and, virtually every time, everyone responded positively to that. People from the fire department, the police department, teachers and presidents of companies—you got the chance to talk to them as human beings and understand who they were.”

People who didn't have status were regarded as equally important customers. In this way, Cliff capitalized on the democratic platform of the diner and fostered an environment where everyone mattered as much as anyone else. Especially at the counter, this democracy of experience prevailed.

Saturday and Sunday mornings, the sense of counter camaraderie was the strongest. People held fast to that vanishing experience during the closing week, snuggling together at the counter over coffee and food. This is what Jane and Bill will miss the most: the people. Jane says she loved meeting different people from different cultures and walks of life.

“It's too bad Cliff couldn't have been here for the end,” Jane laments. “He would have talked to everybody all day long.”

Jane did talk to everybody all day long, and did everything else that she always does: helped in the kitchen, ran the register, washed the dishes and assisted servers. Bill sat down with a reporter from *The New York Times*, but only after the diner closed and he was done cooking for the day.

The final day, last Friday, a camera crew was set up on the sidewalk before Bill even snuck in the back door. They wanted to film the last opening, said they had permission from the owner. “Who did you talk to?” Bill asked. The owner, they said, but then they figured out who they were talking to. Oops.

“The last week was such a zoo,” Bill tells Marla Ortega, chef-owner of the Illium Café. “If you ever close, don’t tell anyone.”