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Manhattan Diner Pulls Up Roots, and Countertop, for the Catskills

By Anthony Ramirez

It was possible to take the money used to buy the defunct Munson Diner, for nearly six decades a neon-lit source of heartburn and nostalgia in Hell's Kitchen, and get, say, a bare-bones BMW convertible.

Of course, opting for a \$30,000 sports car would not get the buyer the eight-door refrigerators (two), refrigerated display cases (two), soup table, deep fryer, Silver King coffee urn and enough seats (7 booths, 15 stools) for four football teams. Or, for that matter, the memories of the "Seinfeld" and "Law and Order" television episodes in which the diner made an appearance.

But restaurant accoutrements and television history are not why Jeremy Gorelick, 25, and a group of upstate investors bought the Munson Diner earlier this year. They bought, Mr. Gorelick said yesterday, for reincarnation in a Catskills town as a "destination location" resembling the hip Restaurant Florent in the meatpacking district in Manhattan, but with a stream of high rollers from, fingers crossed, a nearby casino, or, failing that, a summer music festival like Tanglewood.

And so, to that end, the diner was set to be lifted onto a flatbed truck last night and inched from 11th Avenue and 49th Street over the George Washington Bridge, with a final destination 90 miles northwest of New York: a hill overlooking Liberty, a tiny village in Sullivan County.

"It'll be a classy restaurant in a retro location," Mr. Gorelick said.

Before the diner, the size of a railroad car, left town, its earthly remains were displayed for inspection by reporters.

Tucked like a shoebox into the corner of a car dealership, the diner was shorn away, off its foundation, and moved onto the sidewalk by workers. The diner, two of its sides exposed like a dollhouse, had a lot of rough edges showing. The basement, with the ice machine and other equipment, was peeled away by what seemed like a precision-guided smart bomb.

A year and a half ago, the car dealership, Martin's Volvo, decided to buy out Munson's owner so it could expand, said Anthony Chianese, vice president of the dealership. Mr. Chianese thought that Hollywood or some other entertainment business would be interested, but he got no real offers until the diner was listed for sale on dinermuseum.org, the Web site of the American Diner Museum.

Mr. Gorelick, a real estate investor, spotted the diner there and later discovered why Martin's Volvo was willing to reduce the price to \$30,000 from the listed price of \$33,500: it needed a lot of work. All told, Mr. Gorelick said, he and his 14 other investors from Liberty –

including a village lawyer, a dentist, a music teacher and an electrician – are likely to spend as much as \$250,000 to give the Munson Diner its rebirth in Liberty.

It will take \$40,000 in movers' fees and permits just to get the diner out of Manhattan. An additional \$20,000 goes for land in Liberty, population less than 4,000. But much of the money - \$120,000 and up – will be spent on a new kitchen area, cooking equipment and more seating.

And all of that is before the diner actually opens its doors, an event scheduled for the Fourth of July. “We want cool operators,” Mr. Gorelick said, “something very similar to Florent, a fancy dinner menu, but along with a sloppy greasy-spoon breakfast.”

Some things are beyond the Munson investors' control, however. It is not at all clear that the Indian-run casinos planned for the Catskills, including one at the nearby Kutsher's Sports Academy, will be built. Tribal land claims are still up in the air, and recent court rulings have stopped casino development for now. It is also uncertain whether a performing arts center being built for the New York Philharmonic will gain the popularity of the Tanglewood festival in the Berkshires of Massachusetts.

Still, there is something ironic about the Munson Diner's reincarnation in the Catskills, in its glory days the home of Katz's Bake Shop and Grossinger's Resort.

The diner has nothing to do with Thurman Munson, the Yankees catcher who died in a 1979 plane crash, or anyone else named Munson, an Irish name meaning “man of the cloth” or “the monk.”

Samuel Zelin, whose original name was Zelinsky, and Irving Greenman were business partners who first owned the diner in the 1940's (relatives sold it in 1980). Frances Zelin, Mr. Zelin's daughter-in-law, said the two men wanted a company name that did not sound “too ethnic” and settled on Munson.

While Mr. Gorelick is looking forward to the rebirth of the Munson Diner, his father, Jerry, is skeptical. Mr. Gorelick said his father looked at the dilapidated diner, laughed and said, “It's not going to make it 90 miles on the back of a truck.”

But what did Mr. Gorelick's mother, Donna, think? “Mom's a dreamer,” he said. “This is what should happen to all the old, broken-down buildings of the world.”

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One Heaping Order of Memories, to Go

By Dan Barry/About New York

The Munson Diner just up and left Manhattan this week. No farewell blue-plate special, no second cup of joe. It waited for the light to turn green, made a left on 11th Avenue, and rumbled away from a city that had lost the taste for its meatloaf and gravy.

The diner did not take its leave until 3:30 on Thursday morning, as if to say to night hawks everywhere, This one's for you. Passing under the stage lights of mostly deserted streets, its silvery chrome dazzled, its beveled glass winked, and echoes of diner lingo spilled imperceptibly upon the pavement.

The place closed late last year after six decades of servings eggs lookin' at ya, and the property owners had no interest in short-order cooking. Word spread 100 miles northwest to Livery, N.Y., where some entrepreneurs thought an authentic Manhattan diner could lend retro charm to their upstate town. But the deal did not include free or easy delivery.

Enter Mel Brandt, a specialist in diner relocation from Lancaster, Pa., whose hands are so grease-stained and callused that they look like gloves. The jobs just blur together: Disengaging Russell's Diner from Massachusetts one day, the Ideal Diner from Delaware the next. "Basically the same procedure," he growled. "But still different."

Distinguishing the Munson job was Manhattan, a place that Mr. Brandt found disorienting. But after spending days prying the building from its Hell's kitchen foundation, he felt comfortable enough by Wednesday to eat his takeout lunch at the diner's darkened counter, using abandoned shakers to salt-and-pepper his chicken. Ike and Mike, those shakers used to be called.

By 2 the next morning, he and his crew – Paul, Eli and Omar – had things set for the move. At the southwest corner of 11th Avenue and 49th Street, a hole gaped where the diner had been, and on the flatbed of an idling truck sat a mostly intact, well-secured diner, with counter, stills and a menu marquee still offering meatloaf for \$6.50. A sign on the plate-glass door promised the tastiest sandwich in town.

A waiter from another diner, Roger Cruz, stopped by to pay his respects. He lived around the corner, he said, and ate here many nights.

"Eggs and French toast, 4 in the morning," he said, looking into the hole. "Would sober me up before going to bed."

Mr. Brandt, 57 and looking it, tended to last-minute details while waiting for the state-certified escort cards that would lead him and his sleek cargo up Manhattan and across the George Washington Bridge. He wasn't quite sure of the rout through this foreign terrain, though.

"Eleventh and 10th and Amsterdam?" he asked. "Does all that make sense to you?"

Shortly after 3, Mike Aprile and Pete Liota, partners in the State Island company S & M Vehicle Escorts, pulled up in vehicles adorned with yellow sashes saying "Oversized Load." The ride to the bridge shouldn't be too bad, Mr. Liota said. "You just got that hill in Harlem, from 125th to 135th. By City College there."

The sight of a diner festooned with flashing orange lights and practically floating in air caused a passing police car to pull over.

“Where are they taking it?” one of the officers asked.

“Liberty.”

“Where?”

Finally, it was time. Mr. Brandt walked over to his escorts, and all he did was nod. Mr. Aprile nodded back and said “Rock and roll.”

The light turned green. An escort vehicle turned onto 11th Avenue, followed closely by Mr. Brandt’s truck, lugging a 50-foot-long diner that was 14 feet wide and looking as if it might still be open for business. Sensing that this was not an everyday occurrence in New York, Mr. Brandt beeped his horn in exultation.

The Munson Diner grunted up the avenue at 30 miles an hour, turned east on 57th Street, then north onto Amsterdam, lumbering and trundling, as taxis rode beside it like a Secret Service detail in yellow. Lights glowed green in deference as it continued on, receiving a silent blessing from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine at 111th, an invisible diploma from City College at 136th.

Potholes and road bumps surely knocked free the diner’s clinging ghosts, and released into the cool uptown air all those contained whispers of late-night plots and early-morning coos. Warm that up for you? That’ll be two bits. See ya, doll.

The diner paused at the foot of the bridge, waiting for a Port Authority police car to lead it across the span. The black sky turned soft blue. The city stirred and yawned, but was not quite awake when a streamline diner slipped across the Hudson River, bound for Liberty.