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Memories of the Empire Diner (from Betsyann Faiella)

By [SAM SIFTON](#)

The [Empire Diner](#), a Chelsea mainstay for more than three decades, will serve its last meal on May 15. [Betsyann Faiella](#), a producer, publicist and occasional entertainer who is a former waitress at the restaurant, sent her memories of the place to Diner's Journal, and provided the photograph, at right, of Teddy Dewis, a waiter there, taken around 1986.

We encourage you to share your own stories about the Empire in the comments, below. Photographs may be sent to [dinejournal@nytimes.com](mailto:dinejournal@nytimes.com).

**Now, over to Ms. Faiella:**

I knew this day would come. I spent my formative years there. I had my first public performance there at the upright next to the john. "Anybody in there?" someone asked between songs.

I got my first job in L.A. with a résumé that read, "Head Waitress – The Empire Diner, NYC: Duties included ordering provisions, floral decoration, equipment maintenance, hiring, firing and breaking up fights with my own two hands."

Sometimes a drag queen would be sitting next to Lucille Ball at the counter.... I think.

Once I had to hold the front door closed with my foot while holding plates stacked in both arms so "Scabby" wouldn't come in (one of the locals who lived in the adjacent park and had open sores).

The "man who looked like Fidel" sneaked in one night when it was crowded and broke a bottle over a customer's head so hard he literally didn't know he'd been hit, except for that trickle of blood coming out of his scalp. I was deposed, and the victim's lawyer tried to get me to say I actually saw it happen, but I didn't see it, even though I knew it had happened.

West Chelsea was one of the "dumping" neighborhoods for the mentally ill when the government decided people weren't sick enough to take care of; they bused them from their SROs to other towns and let them off never to return.

There was Bloody Mary, Ginger (who played a mean boogie piano), Coffee Coffee and the scab man, among others. Coffee Coffee had a job.

Phoebe Legere played there, that amazing voice not made for a steel-and-glass room. Charlie Giordano played, Monica Lynch waitressed before becoming the head of Tommy Boy Records. Fine art painters, New York Times illustrators, multimedia producers, actresses, singers...

I met the radiant young Andrea Marcovicci there; she was a soap star living near the seminary with Leon Russom, also a soap star. I told her my mom and I watched her on the Mike Douglas show with her guitar and she and I became good pals.

One night, I stopped in at the graveyard shift and the waiters were in their pajamas and they had ordered a pizza delivery.

Someone insulted Tony Perkins (who lived around the corner), and I had to go to his door and apologize for the diner.

The Empire Diner transformed Chelsea. It was all boarded up then on 22nd and 23rd Streets between Ninth and 10th Avenues. We used to sit in the park (now private with key access) and smoke joints after our shift and look up the street. In the streetlights, it looked like a movie set with the faded colors and the boards on all the doors and windows. So many stories... Mick Jagger, Barry Manilow, Bill Murray, Streisand and Jon Peters cruising by in the Cadillac to check the crowd (too big). The pastry chef who deliberately put gigantic nuts in the cakes so you couldn't cut them. Teddy Dewis playing the "sticks" like a washboard on a ceiling vent while Arnie Warmbrand played Fats Waller for about 25 years, I think. The gorgeous white tapers.... that once set someone's hair on fire as she bent forward laughing.

I thought the leather queens were real cops at first. Teddy got a good laugh out of that.

All three of the owners kissed me hard at least once while I was there, and two of them were gay. Two are gone now, but my biggest crush is still alive.

And I'm only one person with all these memories and more.