

# That precious 'ambience'

276

**C**olette Peters, former Rhode Island School of Design student, renowned cake baker and author of *Colette's Cakes*, was recently asked about her food memories of Providence. This current resident of New York said, "Haven Brothers! We'd go to Haven brothers for hot dogs when I was a student at RISD. It was what we could afford."

No, it wasn't the Capital Grille, Capriccio or Camille's Roman Garden. It was Haven Brothers. True, she was on a student budget, but there must have been other food experiences that were far more expensive, yet not as memorable.

The "Aluminum Room" on Fulton Street next to City Hall has played host to governors and mayors, mink-clad dowagers and students, motorcyclists and judges, the homeless and even college professors. It has been a fixture at that location since 1893, although at times it has been a struggle to keep it there.

Five years ago, then-Mayor Joseph R. Paolino Jr. didn't think Haven Brothers was appropriate nor provided the right ambience for the newly restored Kennedy Plaza, so the diner was relegated to West Exchange Street. Four months later the owner, claiming to have lost \$20,000 as a result of the move, brought the city to court and the judge ruled in his favor.

Today, this landmark restaurant on wheels rolls into the city as commuters leave and serves as a beacon of safety on deserted streets. It provides its famous "dog with the works" to three-piece stockbrokers working late or suburbanites stopping after a performance at Trinity, and serves as a gathering place for others.

My own experience comes from attending meetings in other parts of the country. When I mention Providence, the response I often get is, "Say, is that great little diner still downtown?"

There are some who will say that Provi-

dence should project an image of educational institutions, art museums and great theater. Yes, that would be nice, also. But is it possible to have both Haven Brothers and the nice culture? The image of Providence, often, is that of a beer-and-baseball town with a strong emphasis on blue-collar working people.

There are some who would prefer that we be characterized as a Bacardi and Ballet community, and think that such diners are not appropriate for the city center. Consider the recent decision of the Board of Park Commissioners not to allow Mike's Diner, that other well-known diner that has been here for much of this century, hook up to a 240-volt outlet in Burnside Park.

After eight years on West Exchange Street and a few months' hiatus due to the construction of the convention center, Mike's petitioned for a site in Kennedy Plaza. But guess who objected? Why, the new tenants and owners of renovated Union Station, because it didn't fit in. In other words, Mike's didn't provide the right ambience.

At a time when the downtown is looking for activities that will draw a late crowd and will put people on the street (one of the best ways to prevent crime), why not have a competitive diner for bus patrons, late-night workers and persons leaving performances?

There is no reason why two diners operating in the downtown at night should prevent beer-and-baseball persons and Bacardi-and-Ballet persons from rubbing elbows and finding out what this community is all about. The downtown provides an ambience for everyone.

*Chester E. Smolski is professor of geography and director of urban studies at Rhode Island College.*