

Silver Diner nearly ready to open at National Harbor

By Daniel J. Sernovitz – Senior Staff Reporter, Washington Business Journal

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Bob Giamo and Mark Russell waited until the time was right to open a new Silver Diner location.

The newest iteration of Silver Diner is slated to open next month at National Harbor, expanding the homegrown restaurant group's footprint to two dozen locations and climbing, more than three decades after the original opened in Rockville in 1989.

[The 7,132-square-foot square-foot restaurant](#) at 108 Waterfront St. is a grown-up version of those early diners, so no neon or table side jukeboxes. As the brand has matured over the years, co-founders Bob Giamo, Silver Diner's president and CEO, and Ype Von Hengst, the executive chef, sought to strike a careful balance between old and new, both cosmetically and on the menu.

You'll find throwback elements including stainless steel sunburst patterns common to early lunchwagons fashioned from old train and trolley cars, and graphic images depicting legendary spots like New York's Empire Diner. The menu features tried-and-true favorites like steak and eggs,

pancakes, burgers, milkshakes and fresh-brewed coffee that have helped Silver Diner cultivate generations of loyal customers. To attract new ones, the chain has added design elements and menu items, including its flexitarian selections like lemony chickpea hummus and cauliflower pita and pan-seared scallops. It also launched a new concept within its Navy Yard restaurant, a Silver Social alcohol-serving lounge, and dedicated space for to-go orders, both features incorporated into the National Harbor location as Bar Social.

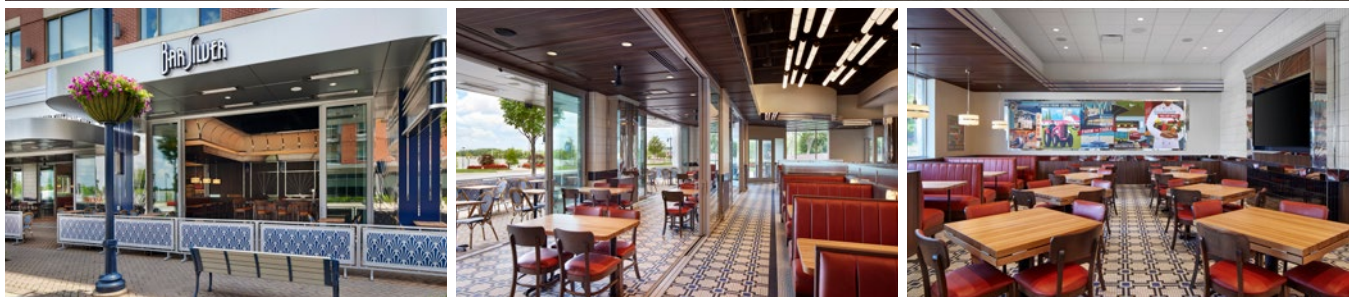
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“What’s allowed us to survive, and thrive, for 30 years and still be a very hot restaurant through three generations of competitors is evolution, continuous evolution of the concept,” Giaimo said in an interview. “Not revolution. We’re keeping the DNA of the diner, the friendly hospitality, but adapting as the world changes.”

Giaimo and Mark Russell, Silver Diner’s vice president of real estate, recently gave the WBJ a sneak peek ahead of the restaurant’s opening, tentatively slated for the first or second week of August. Silver Diner signed a lease more than a year ago with National Harbor’s developer, the Peterson Cos., for the space previously occupied by Elevation Burger, a Subway restaurant and a real estate office. Silver Diner retained Core Architecture + Design and Uniwest Construction Inc. to design and buildout the new space, which includes an indoor-outdoor area for about 65 people looking toward Waterfront Street. It cost more than \$6 million to build out and stock the space, including some items still on back order, with supply chain disruptions and cost escalations responsible for about \$1.2 million of that total cost, according to Russell.

Silver Diner had flirted with the idea of opening at National Harbor in the past, but rejected the notion when the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center was the main anchor tenant. More amenities to the area were added over time, including MGM National Harbor, Tanger Outlets and Top Golf. So, when the Elevation Burger space came available, the stars aligned, per Giaimo. The corner location is a gateway to National Harbor, with dedicated parking and prime visibility to those entering the mixed-use development. Plus, it’s across from Spirit Park, which hosts events including a weekly Stars & Stripes Military Concert Series. Operating partner Sam Jackson, who started out as a server at the chain 25-plus years ago, will oversee the National Harbor location with a staff of around 120 people.



Silver Diner is slated to open in August at National Harbor. Here's a look around.

"I've been down here when there was nothing going on but for the Gaylord, except for tumbleweeds," Russell said. "That's why there was never a family-friendly choice here, because everything was expense accounts and a \$50 check at the bar. We wanted more of a year-round destination, 365 days. Now we've got the casino, now we've got Tanger, now we've got Top Golf, more hotels, and more importantly, all this housing, to where we're confident this could be a year-round model."

Peterson, meanwhile, wanted to diversify its tenant mix with new options, including restaurants serving breakfast and late-night meals, per Kent Digby, executive vice president and senior asset manager for Peterson at National Harbor. The \$4 billion-plus mixed-use development has welcomed new tenants over the past year, including Escapology, Sticky Situations and Tom's Watch Bar. Peterson felt Silver Diner would be a strong fit given its business model and their already tested landlord-tenant relationship, Digby said.

“We want to be in a community where our people are all a part of that community. If we’re spreading our restaurants all over kingdom come, we don’t know those people, they don’t know us and there aren’t those relationships, and relationships are the heart of the diner, so moving in a methodical, disciplined, steady pace of two or three stores a year has allowed us to execute at a level that maintains excellence, and excellence is what you need to be successful.”

“When they open a location, they are dedicated to making it work,” Digby said. “What I love about Silver Diner as a company, and as a culture, and as a philosophy, is they work every aspect as much as they possibly can. These guys are as consistent as you can get, and that’s really the recipe for success in the food industry.”

Beyond National Harbor, Silver Diner plans a new location in White Marsh, outside of Baltimore, slated to open next year with slow but steady growth expanding outside the D.C. region to metro areas including Richmond, Charlottesville and Fredericksburg in Virginia. The company has no plans to expand beyond driving distance from Silver Diner’s home base.

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