The Lamplighter Restaurant in Delmont, Pennsylvania.

Anyone who has traveled east of Pittsburgh on Route 22 over the last few years has witnessed profound changes to the road and roadside. Gone is the three-lane nightmare that at times seemed like a state-sanctioned version of the game “chicken.” Gone as well are many businesses—some old, some not—that were either sacrificed for the additional lanes or lost to last year’s economic calamity. My earliest memories of “22” are from my college years at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Repeated trips to IUP led to a familiarity with places between here and there, and all of the awful sections of the road where I was foolish enough to trust the passing lane.

Businesses along the route were a comfort either as mile markers or regular stops for a bite to eat. I photographed a number of these places over the years. The Ro-Bel Motel, Scotty’s Motel, Dean’s Diner, Gene and Boots Candies, and the Villa d’Esta (on Route 66) were among those of interest for my work. One place that I had stopped in for breakfast but had not photographed until recently is the Lamplighter Restaurant in Delmont, Pennsylvania.

The Lamplighter is a gem from the mid-20th century, with an abundance of authenticity and a still-present vibrancy that make it an essential stop for anyone with a love for roadside architecture. These days, I suppose you could say the restaurant would be right at home in an episode of Madmen, television’s latest infatuation with the post-war period. The restaurant sports one of my favorite neon signs of Western Pennsylvania, flashing the two messages: “Dining Room” and “Lounge” along with a colonial revival lantern.

The sign is on two sides of the building. On countless occasions I saw what sections worked and what didn’t, by viewing one side on my approach, then comparing the other in my rear view mirror. On a beautiful spring evening last year, the whole sign was working on the western wall. It was a treat to spend an hour or so watching the subtle changes as time passed. Because of the alternating messages, light from the tubes that are lit falls on the tubes that aren’t, so you end up with images that exist in the split second between the red, bold capital letters of “DINING ROOM” changing to the turquoise, cursive romance of “Lounge” and the yellow graphic lantern. Because the glass tubes are mounted directly on the brick, a kind of coarse, diffused glow results on the wall. Visually, it doesn’t get much better than this.

After making images of the sign, I couldn’t help but wonder about the origin of the Lamplighter and its long and enduring run. Recently, I spoke with one of the owners, Daniel Ferri, about his family and how they came to own the business some 42 years ago.
The location, originally Beatty’s Restaurant, opened in the 1950s. Along with the restaurant, a modern house was built on the property, a variation of the time-honored “live above the store” way of life. Both the restaurant and the house are set back at a slight grade from the road. Given the road expansion, this looks like a stroke of genius today. Beatty’s Restaurant sold in 1962 to Richard Wright of the Penn Machine Company. It was Wright’s daughter who coined the name The Lamplighter.

Wright bought the restaurant as a place of his own to model after Monroeville’s Holiday House, a long-time, premier live entertainment nightspot of the region. During the same period, Wright also purchased the Lakeview Country Club in Morgantown, West Virginia.

The Lamplighter was sold in 1967 to the Ferri family. Daniel’s older brother Ed was crucial to making the purchase possible. As a family business, the Ferri history dates back to the early 1900s, when Daniel’s father, Joseph Ferri, came to this country as one of eight children. His roots were in Toscolano, Italy. Joseph and his brothers operated an Italian market in Turtle Creek serving the community through five decades. A dedication plaque in the lobby of the Lamplighter from Eugene, Joe, Daniel, Ed, and Bill Ferri to their parents is a fitting tribute to the family’s legacy and success.

In its heyday under the Ferri’s ownership, live bands played nightly and there were up to four weddings a weekend at the restaurant. References to predecessors and contemporaries of the restaurant are woven into the present-day menu. When I visited, I had an open-face steak sandwich that is a direct descendant of the Holiday House (Daniel Ferri’s first cousin, John Bertera, owned the HH), hand cut on order, and delicious. The bleu cheese dressing is Beatty’s original recipe. Featured as well are a signature Reuben sandwich, a Devonshire sandwich (also from the Beatty years), a Rachel sandwich, homemade soups, specialty salads, panini and ciabatta sandwiches, scratch pancakes, and pies baked on the premises. The menu was also influenced greatly over the years by Peasant Village, a favorite of my family and similar in layout to the Lamplighter, that was on Route 51 in Belle Vernon. The restaurant, cocktail lounge, bakery, and neon signs of Peasant Village are no more. That fact made my visit memorable and bittersweet, but live entertainment, large events, and feature nights continue at the Lamplighter.

The Lamplighter
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