

Chef-manager puts a new face on P.J. Clarke's



Ethel Simmons

Surrounded by elegant new restaurants with liquor licenses and inexpensive-but-liquorless hamburger and sandwich shops, P.J. Clarke's in Birmingham is trying to make a name for itself.

The restaurant, which is about the seventh to occupy the space in the corner of the Continental Market, is even described on its menu as "the new P.J. Clarke's."

Marc Davis is the new chef-manager, who has only been there a couple of months but says business is increasing by 25 customers a day. He sees as a good sign the fact that "we're not selling as many burgers."

Actually, selling hamburgers was one of the things Dr. Sonya Friedman, Birmingham personality and P.J. Clarke's owner, was about when she opened the restaurant and named it after her favorite New York watering hole and eatery.

SHE HAD TAKEN over the Continental Market space after the Paradigm, a natural foods restaurant, vacated. Dr. Friedman kept some of Paradigm's vegetarian specialties on the menu but added a big burger, in the style of New York's P.J. Clarke's.

You can still order a Continental Burger, char-broiled to order, with onion, kaiser, plain rolls and "our own fries" for \$2.95.

But now that Davis is there, a new menu is available every month and more desserts have been added.

Davis had gone from Tweeny's in Birmingham to several other restaurants including Healthy Jones in Southfield before joining P.J. Clarke's at Dr. Friedman's invitation.

The new P.J. Clarke's emphasizes high-fishes, especially fresh vegetables and salads. "When the truck man

comes, he says, 'Marc, this is the best today,'" said Davis, explaining how he selects the vegetables for the day's specials and monthly menu.

FRESH VEGGIES, served tempura style in beer batter (\$5.25), or sauteed in fresh butter (\$4.75) also are luncheon attractions. I tried a heaping serving of sauteed vegetables including acorn squash, zucchini, mushrooms, cauliflower, Chinese peapods and bean sprouts, prepared in a wok and served over a bed of rice.

If you have a big appetite for vegetables, you may finish them; otherwise, you can take a doggie bag.

Because P.J. Clarke's doesn't have a liquor license at present (the restaurant is still hoping), iced tea, lemonade and other fruit drinks are featured. Sangria, made with fresh fruit and no wine, will be on the menu soon.

A blackboard gives a listing of the day's specials. On Tuesday it was cream of tomato soup; an omelette with fresh herbs, Swiss cheese and ham; zucchini creole crepes; and mushroom and zucchini quiche. Each day, a different omelette, crepes and quiche are offered.

Salads include a Caesar salad with chicken, falafel salad, Doc's salad, and half and half with falafel and fettuccini. Prices range from \$3.50 to \$5.50 for these luncheon entrees.

DAVIS DESCRIBES falafel as a

midwestern version of a hot dog; Doc's salad named after Dr. Friedman's husband includes his favorite combination of cheeses, ham and turkey; and the half and half is the day's pairing of soup and sandwich.

Menu items can fill the bill for all kinds of diets, and if something isn't on the menu, customers can call ahead or ask Davis to prepare it specially. At lunchtime Tuesday, he was happy to comply with a request for a chicken

dish prepared without salt.

As chef, Davis may spend most of his time in the kitchen cooking or supervising the meals. He tries to find time to get out among the customers also, and many people recognize and greet the slim, curly haired restaurant manager.

Davis said his theory is that you can offer anything if you use the finest ingredients and prepare it well. A

woman he described as "a good groupie" ordered the sandwich called the Best Grilled Cheese and said afterward, "It is the best grilled cheese."

On the dinner menu, selections remain light. "One night Dr. Friedman said she was bringing eight people to dinner and all of them were on diets," Davis said. He solved the problem easily by poaching some fish.

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