

Restaurants go lighter, for economical menus

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Restaurant menus are facing up to the challenge of the 1980s. Many times when you go out to dine now, you find a menu that has lighter fare, not only more practical from a health standpoint but also less expensive.

The full dinner, from appetizer to soup and salad, entree, vegetables, potato and dessert, is no longer to be taken for granted.

In an effort to save money and lure the customer, restaurants frequently price the entree separate from the salad. Vegetables may be sparse on the plate, unless they are ordered a la carte.

Such hearty appetizers as potato skins, fried zucchini and batter-dipped mushrooms may fill in to replace ordering a la carte vegetables, too.

AT LUNCHTIME, the soup and salad, once only a preface, has become a meal in itself. Salads of all descriptions, from Greek to spinach, have gained in popularity as customers keep the inches off and the price down.

The cost of a cocktail or two and after-dinner drinks has risen steadily, and jammed restaurants that keep the customer waiting a long time in the bar, or serve moderately priced meals, may do more profitably on the drinks than the food.

A meal you thought was going to be a bargain may remain one, unless you and your dining partner indulge in several glasses of wine or cocktails. Then, oops! the tab goes up quickly.

One area restaurant that was faced with higher food prices has gone to a new menu where the prices of all the continental cuisine are spelled out. "Thirteen ninety five" is harder to read and may psychologically make it more palatable to order a more expensive dish, since you're not likely to scan the menu comparing all the prices first.

At the Northfield Hilton in Troy, not only do diners at the Wicker Works get a regular menu with a variety of tasty meat and seafood entrees but they may also order from a "Fitness First" menu.

PREPARED BY Marathon Gold Medalist Frank Shorter for the Hilton Hotels Corp., the menu has a selection of daily specialties. The servings and prices are the same at both lunch and dinner.

Monday, for example, can be seen with Cancun Crab Melt, Chicken with Mother Earth Salad, or Fromage et Fruit. Calorie counts also are given, for those dishes it's 500, 490 and 450 calories, respectively.

Many of the entrees are served with a Health Salad mix of shredded cabbage and carrots, dried apples and celery, pineapple tidbits, raisins, sliced radishes and chopped parsley, tossed with a light honey/lemon dressing and topped with toasted sunflower seeds.

Chuck Muer, whose seafood restaurants blanket the Detroit area, has added "Sunset Specials" to "destination restaurants."

According to Muer, the River Crab in St. Clair, the Gandy Dancer in Ann Arbor and Charley's Crab in Troy (luckily not a far distance for South Oakland County residents) have found their patronage down somewhat because of the driving distance and cost of gas.

Muer has added these package dinners of chowder, salad and choice of special menu for \$7.48 during the early evening hours, at the above three restaurants.

OTHER EFFORTS to keep the customers coming in, despite the higher cost of dining out, has brought a new menu and name change from Clam-diggers to Diggers at Muer's eatery in Farmington Hills.

Some tries to keep the costs down, however, have had to be reversed. Taking out the piano bar at Diggers left the patrons unhappy. Even in a tight economy, or maybe especially, people want their music.

The piano bar has been restored. "Live entertainment perks it up," Muer said. "We're doing good business. Patronage is ahead of last year. We're doing the right thing," he said, about Diggers.

Bloomfield Charley's, the family tavern in West Bloomfield, hasn't had to make any big menu changes. "It's moderately priced quality food, and you can take the kids for dinner," Muer said.

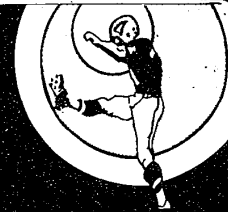
He likened his taverns to "traditional little old neighborhood family places." A casual restaurant with a menu that's fun to read, like Bloomfield Charley's, is "the forerunner" of an increasingly popular kind of dining experience. ON THE WHOLE, gimmicks in the restaurant business are out, according to Muer. "If you dine in a restaurant once or twice a month, you don't want a big menu presentation, you want to eat," he said.



Elliott and Judy Trumbull

Judy Trumbull (above), with husband Elliott, was incorrectly identified in this photograph, which appeared in our Sept. 4 issue. The Trumbulls are shown in their shop The Rialto at 217 S. Woodward, next to the Birmingham Theatre. The Rialto features nostalgic and trendy things and is frequently visited by performers from the Birmingham Theatre, along with other shoppers.

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