

Restaurant Guide

50th IETF
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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What the Codes Mean

For every restaurant we think someone might visit, there's information. Practical information, like the name, address, phone number, and location of the restaurant. Theoretically useful information, like the Zagat's rating codes. And information ranging from the extremely useful, such as whether the restaurant is accessible by skyway and whether reservations are required, to the exceedingly frivolous, such as whether the place has interesting oysters or bad art.

Note that all area codes are 612, unless otherwise specified.

Here's a brief explanation of all the codes.

Zagat's

- F Food Rating
- D Décor Rating
- S Service Rating
- F Food Rating

0-9	poor to fair
10-19	good to very good
20-25	very good to excellent
26-30	excellent to perfection

- C Cost Rating

Estimates the cost of dinner with one drink and tip, as of about a year ago. Lunch is about 25% less.

Codes

- 24 Open 24 hours
- 32B 3.2 Beer
- AE Gray/Grey
- AT Afternoon Tea
- B Breakfast
- BA Bad Art
- BSO Buddhist Shrine with Oblaten
- BW Beer and Wine Only
- CF Cheese Fondue
- D Dinner
- Da Dancing
- Da Darts
- DL Delivers
- FB Full Bar
- FP Free Parking

- GA Good Art
- GD Good Deal
- GE Delivers—Gourmet Express
- GG Good for Groups
- IO Interesting Oysters
- IWL Impressive Wine List
- KF Kid Friendly
- L Lunch
- LL Open Late (11:00 PM)
- LLL Open Very Late (12:30 AM)
- LM Live Music
- MS Mismatched Silverware
- NCC No Credit Cards
- NR No Reservations
- OS Outdoor Seating
- P Pool
- PP Pay Parking
- PW People Watching
- R Romantic
- RE Reservations Essential
- RL Reservations Recommended for Large Parties
- RR Reservations Recommended
- SA Skyway Accessible
- SF Smoke Free
- SS Sit with Strangers
- T Trendy
- TO Take Out
- TOO Take Out Only
- VG Video Games
- VP Valet Parking
- W Waterfront

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Welcome to the 2001 IETF Minneapolis Restaurant Guide

The Twin Cities has a suprisingly good restaurant scene. While we don't have the world-class high-end establishments that big cities have, we've got an array of interesting choices that will delight the palate of even the most world-weary New Yorker. (We point out that Bruce is a world-weary New Yorker, so we're not making this part up.)

Minnesota, at least in places, is still known for its early influxes of immigrants and their cookery (that'd be Scandinavian and German food; and yes, you *can* buy a lutefisk TV dinner at Byerly's). But in recent decades we've seen a grand rush of new Minnesotans from places about as far from here, and as different from here, as you can get. And a lot of these first-generation immigrants are happy to cook you dinner. All the major (and a lot of minor) cuisines can be found around here, from the new Pan-African Restaurant to the South American specialties of El Mesón. You can get handmade *perogies* and sausages from people who learned how to make them in Mother Russia. Any Asian cuisine you can think of is nearby, as is Middle Eastern food from Egypt clear to Afghanistan, all kinds of marvelous meals with roots in Mexico and Central America, even east African food with its no-utensils service, which is a little too exotic for many people's mothers.

It's a far cry from the bland, fatty, but mostly harmless diet many of us grew up on. And it's an adventure. One local Vietnamese restaurant used to advertise: "I didn't come 9,000 miles to cook you ordinary food." And we locals don't brave the Minnesota weather to eat ordinary food.

When we took the job of writing this restaurant guide, we had grandiose plans of writing the perfect Twin Cities restaurant guide, good for a week's visit as well as the rest of the year. Several months and the realities of life (other things to do, too much out-of-town travel, no research budget, sagging enthusiasm) later, we have something that falls a little short. This guide centers on downtown Minneapolis and the IETF hotel; it includes most restaurants in the downtown area as well as many of our local favorites. Thousands of restaurants, including almost everything in St. Paul, are not listed. We just didn't have time to review them.

Our hope, in writing this guide, is to give our out-of-town friends a sense of how limitlessly interesting the local restaurant scene is, and to give our local friends some new places to try.

Who We Are

We're Bruce Schneier and Karen Cooper. One of us writes cryptography and computer-security books; the other doesn't. One of us is a *macher* in PEZ-collecting circles; the other isn't. We're both long-time Netizens and amateur restaurant patrons. We're literate, opinionated, and (most of all) we wanted to write this. This is our restaurant guide, and we hope you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed writing it.

We bring a mixed lot of experience to this project. Bruce, for example, can go on at impressive length about this or that New York chef and where he is

working now, and how this other place has gone quite downhill since he left, and so on. On graduating from college, one of Bruce's first action items was a pilgrimage to France, for the sole purpose of eating in a three-star restaurant. It still ranks as one of the best meals of his life, and if you ask him he will tell you what he ate that night. He takes notes on his meals even when we're not doing a restaurant guide and he compares them with other foodies he knows.

Karen, on the other hand, has actually worked in restaurants. For years and years. She's done every restaurant job except manager, and that means she can tell you why crispy hash browns are always greasy, why you always mop the floor with hot water, what to do if someone accidentally dumps a pitcher containing two quarts of oil on the cook's shoes just as the Sunday brunch rush starts, or how to handle it if you're waitressing alone at two in the morning and your entire restaurant fills up with 200 deaf people.

Why We Bothered

Because we wanted to.

Actually, it's a little more complicated than that. We wrote the restaurant guide for the local science-fiction convention in 1999. This convention was in the Minneapolis Hilton not a month after the IETF met in that very same hotel. We had wanted to have the restaurant guide done early enough to hand out at the conference, but we didn't get our manuscript together in time.

To make a long story short, the guide was very well received. In a world of four-page typewritten lists of local restaurants, a 100-page guide stood out. Some months later, it was nominated for a Hugo Award in the "Best Related Work" category. (Exactly how a restaurant guide counts as a science-fictional related work is best left undiscussed.) We didn't win, but it was an honor just to be nominated.

So here it is 2001, and the IETF is back in Minneapolis. We've taken our two-year-old guide, updated it for the new millennium, convinced Counterpane to sponsor it (it wasn't hard), and gave it to you. We hope you find it entertaining, if not useful.

How We Reviewed

We're not professional restaurant reviewers; we just appreciate good food and are opinionated about it. We've also eaten at enough different restaurants—from three-star restaurants in Paris to back alley open-air kitchens in China and dirt-floor *comedores* in Guatemala—to have a wide variety of experiences. But we're just amateurs.

Professionals visit restaurants several times before reviewing them. Most newspaper reviews are based on at least three visits—usually groups of four people, so the reviewer can taste a variety of items. Reviewing a great restaurant can take four or five visits. Ruth Reichl, who reviewed restaurants for the *New York Times*, reportedly visited Jean Georges six times before writing her review. (This is a job we would gladly take away from her.) We visited most restaurants once, some more than once, and some not at all.

One visit is problematic, we know. We could have visited the restaurant on an off night; we could have ordered the wrong thing. On the other hand, we could have visited the restaurant on the one day that the cook actually showed up.

Or we could have ordered the one thing that isn't made in a warehouse in Pittsburgh and then shipped to the restaurant by Parcel Post. What we recorded is our impressions; they are necessarily imperfect. But they are ours and we stand by them.

Some restaurants we know well. We go out to eat a lot, sometimes even in Minneapolis. We have our favorites, and are able to talk about those with more authority. Perhaps the hardest part of doing this guide was our self-imposed ban on going to the same restaurant twice until after we put the guide to bed. But the ban forced us to visit restaurants that we might never have gotten around to, and we found some real gems.

And then there were the restaurants we didn't get to. We had all the right intentions; we meant to get there. But deadlines wait for no one, and in the end we just had to manage. So we stole other people's reviews: *Gourmet Magazine*, the Citysearch Web site, *City Pages*, *Zagat's*, and elsewhere. But we gave credit where credit was due.

What We Reviewed

Looking through this guide, we see we've listed a lot of restaurants outside of downtown. Let us explain.

We don't actually expect everyone to drive to dinner every night. We don't expect many people will. When we invented this job, we thought it fun to review the Minneapolis restaurant scene. Since there are so many restaurants in the Twin Cities, we chose places to review based on the following criteria:

1. Restaurants that are close to the hotel (e.g., Carver's, Café Un Deux Trois).
2. Restaurants we really liked (e.g., Shuang Cheng, Me Gusta).
3. Special-occasion restaurants (e.g., Goodfellows, Aquavit).
4. Distant restaurants we were going to anyway (Puerta Azul, Sakura).

We could have spent more time on the boring corporate chains, but what can you really say about T.G.I. Fridays that everyone doesn't know about already?

What You Have Here

You have a resource, not an encyclopedia. Hundreds of local restaurants, including some very good ones, are not included in this guide. Important data are not in this guide, and some of the data are wrong.

When we started this project, we talked to a friend who reviews restaurants professionally in Chicago. One of the things she told us is that restaurants lie. They give out erroneous information. Hours change, menus change, cooks leave and are hired elsewhere. Published reviews are rarely 100% accurate. We tried our best, but please keep this in mind: there are mistakes in the data.

We tried to compensate for bad data by giving you a lot of data. You'll find reviews of restaurants, of cuisine types, of whatever we felt like writing about. We've included text boxes of useful information. And there are indices where the information is cross-referenced and compiled and sliced and diced. There are loopy codes.

If we have one useful piece of advice to give you, it is this: **call before going.** We purposely left out opening and closing hours because they change too often. So call. Check that they're actually open and serving food. Make a reservation, so you're not stuck standing around waiting for a table. It's easy.

And if you've made a reservation and then change your mind, please call to cancel. All the other people standing around the restaurant lobby staring at the empty table that is being saved for you will thank you. Some restaurants have even instituted a policy of guaranteeing reservations with a credit card, and extracting a cancellation fee from no shows. It's because people make reservations at three places, eat at one of them, and never bother calling the other two back.

Where There's More

There is a lot of information out there about Minneapolis restaurants, but you have to look for it. On the national scene, Minneapolis is often ignored. *Gourmet Magazine's* 1999 restaurant listed many Minneapolis restaurants; the 2000 poll only found room for two. *Food & Wine* magazine covered sixteen cities in their 2000 restaurant poll; Minneapolis was not one of them. (Their 1999 poll didn't mention Minneapolis, either.) There is a Minneapolis/St. Paul *Zagat's*, and the national *Zagat's* guides do list Minneapolis restaurants. *The Wine Spectator* includes a bunch of Minneapolis restaurants in their survey of good wine restaurants. Ruth Reichl, in her first few months as editor of *Gourmet*, reviewed a few Minneapolis restaurants. Mostly, though, you have to rely on local sources.

The Twin Cities has two newspapers—the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*—and both have regular restaurant reviews. There are two magazines—*Mpls.St.Paul* and *Minnesota Monthly*—that have restaurant reviews. The annual “Readers Poll” is in the March issue; you can buy it on the newsstand right now. And there's our favorite reviewer, Dara Moskowitz, who writes for the free alternative weekly: *City Pages*. We think she's the best.

There are also several Web sites that review restaurants around the country. We made use of Citysearch (formerly Sidewalk) and DigitalCity. The great customer-opinion site, ePinions.com, does not cover Minneapolis restaurants.

Here are some URLs you may find useful:

City Pages Restaurant Page

<http://www.citypages.com/restaurants/>

Mpls.St.Paul Magazine Restaurant Page

<http://www.mspmag.com/dining.asp>

Minneapolis Star Tribune Restaurant Page

<http://www.startribune.com/freetime/dining/>

St. Paul Pioneer Press Restaurant Page

<http://justgo.realcities.com/twincities/dining/>

Zagat's Minneapolis Web site

<http://www.zagat.com/>

...and then click to the Minneapolis page.

Citysearch (formerly Sidewalk) Restaurant Page

<http://twincities.citysearch.com/section/restaurants>

There are a whole mess of amateur Minneapolis restaurant pages, but you can find those yourself on google.com. We never found one we liked much.

Where Are We

We're in downtown Minneapolis: office buildings, a convention center, department stores; you get the idea. The downtown area is a small space, and the hardy will find that everything is in walking distance. There's a broad range of restaurants in walking distance, or easy travel distance. The Minneapolis Hilton is near Nicollet Avenue (use the local pronunciation: "nik-lit"), the best concentration of interesting restaurants for hundreds of miles in any direction. It's near the Warehouse District, another area with a wide range of good choices for dinner out. It's near the freeway, so you can head out further afield. And it's on the skyway.

One of the nice things about downtown Minneapolis is the skyway system. Skyways are those pedestrian bridges that cross the streets from one building to the next on the second floor. You can live in a building connected to the skyway, work in another, and do your banking, your dry cleaning, or your shopping, and appear in court, all without ever going outside. The skyways are all handicapped accessible, too, with wheelchair lifts built in the few places they couldn't use a ramp to get around the occasional stairs. These form a human Habitrail that runs from one end of downtown to the other. You'll be able to range from the hotel in coat-free comfort for many blocks. While the skyways don't run everywhere downtown you might want to go, they can get you close. And while they're not open all the time, you still should consider taking the skyway any place downtown.

The skyway system is signed—although not particularly well—and there are maps. You stand the best chance of getting hopelessly lost in a department store, where the skyway wanders in from one direction and out via several others. Happily, department store employees are generally at hand to point you in the right direction to go from where you are to where you want to be.

How to Tip

Tippling is a strange beast. On the one hand, Bruce grew up learning that "tips" stood for "to insure prompt service." On the other hand, the tip is given after the meal (or taxi ride, or porter service, or whatever). People tip, generally irrationally, because it's expected of them. And since it has become expected, the government has allowed restaurant owners to calculate a waiter's pay based on expected tips. Which means what was once an option on the part of the customer is now part of the waiter's base wage.

Karen: "Ever lived off tips? I have. I've put up with amazing crap from total strangers, trying to do a good enough job to convince them to tip. It's not pretty. There was the day I realized that people who order Thousand Island dressing don't tip. There were the countless jerks who left me a penny, or who

put the tip under a full, upturned, glass of water (this joke is funny exactly never). There was my glorious last day ever of waitressing, when I volunteered to wait on all the regulars who never, ever, ever left a tip. Every time one such would ask for a refill of coffee, or some dessert, or whatever, I'd tell 'em, 'And why should I bother? You don't tip!'"

We're constantly amazed by how much trouble some techies have with tipping. It seems that some people think it optional, and when push comes to shove they have a hard time actually putting the correct amount of money down on the table. Tipping is not optional. You're no longer in college; you can afford it. It is how the waiter or waitress (and in some restaurants, the bus people and the bartenders) gets paid. Which means it's how they pay their rent, buy their food, and bid for all those Beanie Babies on eBay. This, in turn, will reignite the Internet stock boom and bolster the U.S. economy. So leave a tip; it's patriotic, and it's how the food service industry operates.

A standard tip is 15% of the check, excluding tax but including alcohol. This is easy to calculate: look at the amount, move the decimal place over one, and then add half again. So if the amount is \$17.42, the tip would be $\$1.70 + .85 = \2.50 , more or less. If the amount is \$8.00, that's $\$0.80 + \$0.40 = \$1.25$, more or less. You get the idea. (You can also calculate the tip off the tax. In Minneapolis, double the 7% sales tax and add a little. But the tax changes in different cities and states.) Rounding is perfectly reasonable, but try to round up more often than down.

If you're with a group of people, don't round down. You're just making your dinner companions either 1) pay more than their share, or 2) cheat the wait-staff out of money they have earned. It is unacceptable to go to dinner with a group and think something like: "I only have \$8.00 for dinner, so I'll order a \$7.50 sandwich and then stiff the waitress." Go to a fast food restaurant where no one tips, or eat alone.

The tendency for larger parties to undertip (everyone throws what they think they owe into the middle, and if it comes out short they just short the wait-staff) leads many restaurants to calculate a standard tip (sometimes 15%, sometimes as high as 20%) and add it to the check. Look for it so you don't inadvertently tip twice.

Stiffing the waitress is a big deal, and should only be done in response to lousy service. Lousy service does not equal less than stellar service; it means demonstrably bad service. In Karen's professional opinion, there are a few markers of bad service such that leaving a tip would Only Encourage Them. These include: a server who, when repeatedly asked for a item (sugar, ketchup, napkins, coffee, etc.), never brings it; a server who appears to forget your existence (takes the order of other tables in his section that were seated after yours while you wait to order); a server who does not remove any dish from the table, even when empty. Of course, profuse sincere apologies will go a long way toward convincing us that whatever has gone wrong is a mere fluke.

Like commissions to publishing agents, tip percentages have been creeping up over the last decade or so. At the best restaurants in New York people whisper that an 18%–20%, or even a 25% tip, is more reasonable. We haven't seen this trend hit the Twin Cities, even in what passes for the high-end around here.

Getting Around

The Hilton is in the middle of downtown Minneapolis. Well, more accurately, it's near the southwest end of downtown Minneapolis, in the business district. What this means is that many restaurants are within walking distance, but they tend to be the business-lunch-downtown-trendy-drink-with-your-buds variety. If you want to experience the good cheap ethnic restaurants, you're going to need wheels. If you rented a car, great. If not, take a taxi.

Taxis

Grabbing a taxi is just about the simplest way of getting to a dinner destination you can't walk to. It's cheaper than it appears, if you think about it. A cab is likely to cost you about \$5, total, to get to most of the restaurants in this guide.

Getting a cab is easy. Just go out the front door of the hotel. The hotel doorman will hail a cab, you and your friends pile in, and you tell the driver where you want to go. He takes you there, and you pay (with a 10% tip). Getting back to the hotel is only slightly more problematic. The taxis here do not cruise for fares, like they do in real big cities. You'll need to phone for a cab to pick you up (you can try asking the restaurant to call for you). Note that Minneapolis' area code is 612, and St. Paul's is 651—and you don't need to dial a "1" first. Minneapolis has many taxi companies. We're listing a few in the order we have found them most reliable:

Rainbow Cab: 612-332-1615

Blue & White: 612-333-3333 or 612-333-3331

Yellow Cab: 612-824-4444 or 612-824-4000

Green & White: 612-522-2222

Red & White: 612-871-1600

Alternatively, ask the restaurant for a recommendation. There might be a taxi company or a cab stand right around the corner, lines of cabs waiting to whisk you back to the Hilton. If you're returning to the hotel from St. Paul, or from one of the suburbs, you have to call a cab company that's licensed to pick up where you are. In St. Paul, try:

Diamond Cab: 651-642-1188

Citywide Cab: 651-489-1111

Out in the suburbs, try:

Suburban Taxi: 651-222-2222

(Suburban area code depends on which side of the Mississippi River you're on, mostly. You'll have to wing it.)

Some companies are licensed to pick up in all cities and suburbs; check the Yellow Pages for more info.

The Bus

Public transportation to many of the restaurants listed in this guide is fast and easy, not to mention cheap. Buses stop at any corner, whether it is a marked stop or not, but cranky drivers sometimes ignore this rule. You'll do best to

catch the bus at a marked stop. Look for the sign with a picture of a bus and the words “bus stop.” And MetroTransit (the bus company) has a policy where you can get a transfer for your return trip that will be good for 2.5 hours. If you can eat quickly enough, they’ll take you back for free. Bus fares for all rides in the city are either \$1 or \$1.50, depending on day and time. Rides within the specific downtown core are in a special zone with a fare of just \$.25 or \$.50.

Get details from the automated information line: 341-4BUS. Each bus should also have a pocket schedule for you to take, but they sometimes run out. If you can surf the Web ahead of time, all the bus schedules are available at <http://www.metrotransit.com>.

Walking the Skyways

Different parts of the skyway system are open different hours. If we recommend a restaurant as being on the skyway, it’ll be on the main part of the skyway, which is open the following hours:

Mon. to Fri.: 6:30 AM to 8:30 PM
Sat.: 10 AM to 8:30 PM
Sun.: 11 AM to 6:30 PM

Delivery

Interesting idea, isn’t it? Stay in the hotel, and let the food come to you.

The most obvious thing to order is pizza. We don’t really know why pizza is the quintessential food delivery product. Maybe it’s because its inherent flatness makes it easier to deliver. We do know that this is not strictly an American phenomenon; we once stayed in a hotel inside the ancient walled city of Toledo (Spain, not Ohio) and were kept awake much of the night by a fleet of small noisy Telepizza motorcycles, making deliveries down streets too narrow for cars.

As we say in the section on pizza, our favorite delivery place is Beeks. This is not to say that the pizza is good, just that if we were forced to order pizza to be delivered in Minneapolis, we would pick Beeks. Unfortunately, they don’t deliver downtown. Dulono’s Pizza does deliver downtown, and they’re pretty good. Pizza Lucé is well-regarded by many of our friends, though we are less impressed. They are open until 2:30, well after the bars close.

Dulono’s Pizza: 612-827-1726
Edwardo’s: 612-339-2736
Pizza Lucé: 612-333-7359
Uptown Pizza: 612-823-7203

The particular Hilton concierge we talked to said that Uptown Pizza was his favorite. Karen votes for Dulono’s. Bruce grudgingly picks Pizza Lucé. And if you want to share with us, order a pepperoni and mushroom pizza or a green pepper and onions. No anchovies, please.

You can order more interesting food, too. There’s a company called Ez2get.com that’s basically a taxi company for food. (Near as we can tell, this

company used to be called Gourmet Express, but that wasn't dot-commie enough.) They have a Web site with menus from various restaurants (50 in the December–February edition, which is what's at hand as we write). You call them up, order food from as many restaurants as you like. They place the order with the restaurants, pick the food up when it is ready, and deliver it to your hotel-room door.

There are some good restaurants in the book—D'Amico and Sons, Rainbow (the Chinese restaurant, not the grocery store), Kypros, Sawatdee, Famous Dave's BBQ—and a lot of average ones. Not all restaurants deliver to everywhere, so pay attention to the “delivery zones” on the second page of the book.

Minimum order is \$15, which is easy to reach with two or three people. Delivery charge is \$6.50 per restaurant, and they add a 10% tip for orders over \$50. (We assume they expect the same for deliveries under \$50.)

If you can't bear to leave the hotel, it's an option. Copies of the current book of menus are available at the hotel concierge desk.

Airline Food

Okay. Let's have a show of hands. Who chooses an airline because of the food? Nobody.

Well, the airlines have figured this out, too.

Bruce has logged more air miles than most people put together: over 150,000 miles a year split between his two main airlines, and a smattering of miles on other carriers. Over the years, he's watched the decline of airline food. Flights that used to serve hot lunches now serve small baskets with a half-sandwich or a trendy wrap. Or they serve snacks. Flights that used to serve smaller things now serve nothing. American Airlines introduced a “Bistro Service,” which is marketing-speak for “pick up a small lunch bag on the way in so we don't have to waste time serving you.” Northwest did something equally irritating with their “dinner à la carte” service.

Food service in business and first class, especially on long international flights, is better. But at an additional \$1000–\$8000 a ticket, you'd expect that. Caviar in first class on all international flights, decent wines, ice cream sundaes with hot chocolate sauce. Short domestic flights in business class offer what coach used to: hot breakfasts, vaguely interesting entrées, edible desserts.

As an example, on a recent American flight from Chicago to Philadelphia, those in coach got one of those Bistro bags. Inside was a half a cold chicken wrap, a small apple, a bag of chips, and some bottled water. That was lunch. First class got a choice. The cold shrimp plate consisted of six shrimp, some funny-tasting white horseradish sauce, a bland pasta salad, and some washed-out tomato vegetable soup. The chicken focaccia Caesar salad had nothing good to say about itself except that it was hot. And that's in *first* class.

This isn't to say that the airlines aren't trying. Every airline with an advertising budget is touting whatever chef they've hired to make a 2-inch by 4-inch rec-

tangular food pod look appetizing and taste interesting. American Airlines lists some impressive names in its “Chef’s Conclave,” which supposedly “meets regularly to discuss the latest food trends, develop new menu items, and enhance the quality of [the] inflight service.” We wish they’d do the cooking. (They also have a wine consultant by the very suspicious name of “Dr. Richard Vine.”) But price is the key. A dollar saved feeding you is a dollar earned, period.

Some people bring their own food on the plane. Recently airports have dropped their exclusive contracts with institutional food vendors and have brought in nationally recognized fast-food–type restaurants. But walking onto the plane with a Pizza Hut personal pan pizza, or even a Happy Meal, is likely to bring about stares of resentment from the other passengers. It really helps if you bring enough to share.

The one trick we can offer is to look at the special meals. Airlines have always accommodated special diets, both religious and health-related, and as a result offer lots of special meals. Sometimes they can be better than the standard fare you’ll otherwise be forced to eat.

American Airlines has 11 special meals: bland/soft, child’s, diabetic, fresh-fruit platter, gluten-free, heart-healthy, kosher, low cholesterol/fat, low sodium, seafood platter, vegetarian. The best is the seafood platter, which comes with snow crab, shrimp, grilled zucchini and yellow squash, and penne pasta.

Northwest Airlines has 19: Asian vegetarian, baby/infant, bland, child’s menu, diabetic, fresh fruit, gluten free, Hindu (standard), Hindu (vegetarian), Japanese, kosher, lactose/milk protein free, low cal/low cholesterol/lowfat, low carb, low sodium, Muslim, refugee, soft diet, and sulfite free. (Since we know you’re interested, “refugee” is “southwest Asian cuisine” carried on flights that bring refugees into the U.S.)

And United Airlines wins with a whopping 28 possible special meals, including: Asian vegetarian, bland, chicken, diabetic, gluten-free, Hindu, hypoglycemic, Indian vegetarian, infant’s, kosher, low cholesterol/lowfat, low protein, low purine (whatever that is), low sodium, Muslim, non-lactose, *obento*, refugee, toddler, vegetarian. Matt Blaze, AT&T cryptographer and United frequent flyer, likes to order the cold seafood plate.

Not all special meals are available on all flights or in all classes of service. The United *obento* Japanese meal, for example, is only available in first and business class on flights to and from Asia. You have to order these meals at least 24 hours in advance (sometimes they’ll accept requests closer to departure), and there’s always the chance that things will get screwed up and your special meal won’t show up. But if that happens, you’ll be no worse off than you were without it.

African

It’s open. No, it’s closed. No, it’s open. No, it’s closed. Well, the last time we walked by, some other African restaurant was in that space. Odaa is gone.

Odaa was one of “our” restaurants. When Bruce was living in Chicago, he would come up to visit and we would go there a lot. We would always order the same thing: the Odaa Sampler, an all-you-can-eat platter of about nine puddles of good vegetarian stuff, with some good meat stuff in the middle. We ate it without utensils, using *injera*, the yummy Ethiopian bread they served it with. Much of it was spicy; all of it was tasty.

Over the years, we watched the quality of Odaa declining. First it was canned string beans, then potatoes instead of more exotic vegetables. Then the restaurant was cut in half, and the other half was rented out to a store selling fabric and African clothing. Then it closed entirely.

We mourn Odaa’s passing, and regret that we never got together a large enough party to eat in the hut.

Since then, we’ve haven’t found a restaurant to replace Odaa. New Chili Time is across the street. We tried to eat there twice, but the shabbiness of the décor and the sullenness of the clientele put us off. (We notice that we can’t find a review of it anywhere. Have all other reviewers been afraid to walk in there, too?) The menu on the outside listed both East African dishes and Cincinnati-style chili, further cause for concern.

Bruce tried the **Addis Ababa Ethiopian Restaurant**. It’s clean, freshly painted, with cheesy African art on the walls that actually looked pretty nice. The menu was just what you’d expect. They had *wat*: random protein (chicken, beef, lentils, split peas) cooked with onions, garlic, ginger, and Berber sauce. They had *alecha*: random protein cooked with garlic, ginger, onions, and green pepper. They had lots of vegetarian dishes: lentils cooked several different ways, cabbage, and *tekel gommen*, an interesting dish of cabbage, carrots, potatoes, green peppers, and onions that didn’t taste like anything else, even though it shared most of the ingredients. They have a combination plate (either vegetarian or with meat), which is the best way to eat at one of these restaurants. But the food wasn’t nearly as good as Odaa was when it was good.

The **Pan-African Restaurant** (out in Brooklyn Park) has gotten some good reviews, but we haven’t managed to get there yet. Our sources tell us that you should try the Monrovia platter if you’re looking for something easy and good, and something with *fufu* if you’re adventurous. (Charitably, *fufu* is an acquired taste. It’s a West African staple made by boiling semi-fermented cassava flour into a glutinous mass and rolling it into balls.) Most of the food has been toned down for Minnesotan palates.

With the massive influx of East African refugees to the Twin Cities, it seems there’s another new African restaurant on every corner. **Red Sea** and **Blue Nile** are two restaurants we haven’t tried yet. Let us know if you go.

Addis Ababa Ethiopian Restaurant

2341 Riverside Ave., Minneapolis
612-337-0262

Pan-African Restaurant

7532 Brooklyn Blvd, Brooklyn Park
763-561-7887

Ethiopian
NR, L, D

Pan-African

Red Sea

320 Cedar Ave S, Minneapolis
 Riverside Ave & Cedar Ave S
 612-333-1644

East African

TO, FB, L, D, LL, LLL, P, Da

Blue Nile

2027 Franklin Ave E., Minneapolis
 Cedar Ave & E Franklin Ave
 612-338-3000

Ethiopian

Zagat's: F-20, D-14, S-16, C-\$12
 RL, TO, FP, FB, L, D, Da, P, LM

Auriga

We tried to get here, we really did. But we ran out of time.

Citysearch says: “Melinda Goodin, Scott Davis and Doug Flicker—who have cooked elbow-to-elbow at D’Amico Cucina, the Loring Cafe and Table of Contents—opened **Auriga** to showcase their talents with fresh, seasonal, home-grown food. The brief menu, which changes biweekly or so, includes fish, chicken, beef or pork, game, and vegetarian dishes. Most of the dishes are subtly delicious: roast rabbit, parsley root and porcini mushrooms generously dressing homemade pasta; chewy brown rice-and-walnut croquettes nested beside wilted greens, portobello mushrooms and thin parsnip crisps.”

Other reviewers are similarly glowing. Consider this a blind recommendation.

Auriga

1930 Hennepin Ave, Minneapolis
 Hennepin Ave & Franklin Ave
 612-871-0777

American (New)

Zagat's: F-24, D-20, S-20, C-\$27
 RR, VP, FB, D, R, SF, PW

Aquavit

Aquavit is one of New York’s fine restaurants. The restaurant serves Scandinavian food to a clientele who isn’t very experienced with that sort of cuisine. Last year Marcus Samuelsson (chef and part owner) opened a branch in Minneapolis, presumably based on the fact that Minneapolis has a higher-density of Scandinavians. To sum up, wow. This was easily the best meal we have eaten in Minneapolis.

The restaurant is elegant but understated, lively without being noisy, light without being bright. The waitstaff was friendly and efficient without being haughty.

The menu is sort-of Scandinavian. Think Nordic ingredients used in nouveau French preparations: gravlax in black and purple mustard sauce, fennel blini, lotus-crusting char with cannellini beans, garlic confit, truffle consommé; that sort of thing. If a French chef were shipwrecked in the fjords, this is what he’d serve after foraging in town. The menu was heavy on fish—lobster, tuna, oysters, caviar, smoked salmon—but there were other things, too. There was a

venison loin with chestnut mashed potatoes, pear strudel, and port wine sauce. The smoked duck came with seared *foie gras*, duck sausage fritters, onion confit, and a glogg reduction. There was also lamb, Cornish hen, salmon, char, yellowtail.

All of the food is based on the Scandinavian taste for lots of seafood (happily there is no whale, though Norway still sends out whalers). The few vegetables tend toward potatoes, onions, white beans. Karen always thought Bruce's "white food" joke was just that—apparently not.

We all ordered the tasting menu (it's an all-or-nothing deal; if anyone at the table defects than no one can order it), which gave us a six-course tour through the Aquavit kitchen.

The food was all marvelous: an oyster and caviar cocktail, steamed lobster, tuna with shiitake mushrooms and truffle sea urchin sauce, the aforementioned duck, a cheese course, and a wonderful chocolate ganache dessert with blueberry sauce. Not a clunker in the bunch, and two tiny bonus courses: a herring taco to start things off, and a small lemon custard before dessert.

The only odd part was the menu. One would expect the printed menu to serve as a reliable roadmap through the meal, but that wasn't the case. Each course was barely recognizable from the menu descriptions.

A case in point: the second course was billed as "Steamed Lobster, Squid Ink Tagliatelle, Smoked Tomato Consommé." When this dish was served, we each got a piece of lobster, some cannellini beans done with a vegetable we think was celeriac, and a bit of black truffle floating in a pale barely reddish-tinged broth. Mind you, all of this was absolutely delicious. We have no complaints on that score. But our server asked if the kitchen had included the squid ink pasta with that course, and when we said no, offered no explanation. Hmmm...

The cheese course was our favorite mystery. We expected "Danish Blue, Endive Salad." What we got had nothing green anywhere to be seen, which more or less confirmed Bruce's observation about the Scandinavian "white food diet." We were served slices of pear poached in glogg sauce, wrapped around some tiny but intensely flavorful fragments of blue cheese. Perhaps there was some endive in there; we couldn't tell.

Again, the food was exceptional. But the menu seemed to have been written by someone who was told last week what he'd be serving, didn't take notes, and has a terrible memory. While this added a charming and unexpected bit of whimsy to our experience, we can see how people with food allergies or strong preferences would be rather less pleased.

The most rare and remarkable part of the whole experience is that Aquavit presented us with six splendid courses and sent us home without offering so much food we overate. We have eaten countless meals where we are presented with so great an amount of food we must stuff ourselves to eat it all. Nothing like that here. Would that more restaurants learned the trick of serving a sufficiency, and not twice that amount. We have seen it in only one other restaurant: Masa's in San Francisco.

Aquavit itself means "water of life," and is the name of the strong Scandinavian liquor, served ice-cold in tiny glasses. It comes flavored by various fruits and herbs, and great jars of this stuff sat steeping throughout the restaurant.

Nearest our table a vat of citrus aquavit was in progress, looking like nothing so much as a Galileo thermometer. We tried the lingonberry aquavit, which we thought was much too strong for our tastes and suppose that proves its authenticity.

There is a vegetarian (not vegan) tasting menu, as well as a normal array of à la carte items to choose from. Our favorite offering from the regular menu is the Herring Plate: “Four types of Herring and the Necessary Accessories.” We ventured that those necessary accessories include an accordion, two buckets, and a copy of *The Financial Times* from last October.

Service was good, although a bit off at points. It is unacceptable for a waiter to take your plate before you’re done with it. But even with that, we had an excellent experience. Be warned.

It’s also one of the most expensive meals you can have in the Twin Cities; don’t expect to get out for less than \$50 a person.

Aquavit

IDS Center, Minneapolis
S 7th St & Nicollet Mall
612-343-3333

Scandinavian

Zagat’s: unrated
RE, PP, FB, L, D, SF, SA, R, T

Barbecue

Minneapolis isn’t St. Louis. It’s not Texas. It’s not even Chicago. It’s not known for its ribs. But we have some options. We have **Rudolph’s**, the only ribs restaurant we know of with walleye on the menu. While we’ve had good meals there, and will probably go back, the place has a slightly dirty feel to it. Karen finds herself inspecting the silverware sort of closely. The Sunday brunch is surprisingly good.

Famous Dave’s BBQ & Blues Club, a chain restaurant, purports to be a Chicago ribs restaurant. Near as we can tell, what this means is that there are fake Chicago signs, exposed brick walls and faux grimy floors, and Chicago El tracks near the ceiling. Every five or so minutes a recording plays of a train going by overhead (including steel wheels screeching on the tracks). We think the Chicago motif is annoying at best. There’s music on top of the manufactured noise: live blues on most nights and recorded music the rest of the time. Not a quiet place by a long shot.

The ribs—St. Louis style—are probably the best in the city (the readers of *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* and *Minnesota Monthly* voted them so), and the sauce is sweet and tasty. The sides are nothing special: mediocre French fries, okay baked beans, boring coleslaw, terrible corn on the cob, only slightly better cornbread. Portions are large here, so pay attention while ordering. And this place is popular: on weekends expect a long line. Remember, you’ll be fighting for space with those who are there for the music.

Market Bar-B-Que might serve Jay Leno’s favorite ribs, but we thought they were just okay. The restaurant is generally considered to be the best ribs joint in Minneapolis. At least, that’s what all the surveys say; the lobby’s walls are

overflowing with “Best Ribs” award certificates and glowing reviews. The restaurant dates from the vaudeville era (although it’s moved since then), and supposedly attracted performers by staying open late. Today, Jay Leno reportedly loves the place. “Third best,” say the readers of *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* (they voted Rudolph’s second best).

Anyway, the ribs are okay. Unlike Rudolph’s, the meat is served dry (known as “naked” in the business), with squirt bottles of hot or mild sauce on the table. We tried the pork and beef ribs, both, and thought they were pretty good. Nothing to complain about, nothing to write home about. The ribs are chewy, but the sauce is tasty. At least the regular is; the hot sauce is hotter but much less flavorful. Everything else is an afterthought: the French fries are terrible and the coleslaw is ordinary. The baked potatoes are not as steam-drawer-soggy as some, which was nice. The onion rings are first rate: light and slightly crispy batter on big thick rings of onion. And there are a number of combo plates for the indecisive.

The restaurant has a kind of diner feel to it, with lots of high-backed booths and little juke boxes at each. It’s probably worth going just to see the mix of music: Glen Miller, Hanson, Aerosmith, Enya, Stevie Wonder, Frank Sinatra, etc. That and the autographed celebrity photos on the walls.

Ted Cook’s 19th Hole Bar-B-Que has its devotees. It’s a takeout-only place that Karen has meant to try for all the 20 years she’s lived in Minneapolis. Other reports say their beef ribs have plenty of meat, and the sauce is tasty, whether you choose the regular or spicy version. The rib tips are a bargain. Anything you get from there is messy; these are not dry ribs. Meals come with a piece of bread; we’re not sure why, though it might be handy if you run out of napkins.

The Pickled Parrot won the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* national rib cook-off. We haven’t been there, either.

Scott Ja-Mama’s is a few blocks from our house. Primarily a take-out, there are two tables in the place that you are welcome to sit at if you have nowhere else to go. The ribs are not just greasy but fatty and the sauce is uninspiring (at mild, medium or hot). We don’t go there anymore.

We’ve heard rumors of great barbecue way out in Rochester, MN. If you need to visit the Mayo Clinic, consider stopping at **John Hardy’s Bar B-Q** or **Roscoe’s Barbeque**. Each has two locations, and we haven’t managed to get to any of them.

Oh yeah, there’s also a **Tony Roma’s** at the Mall of America. But you can not eat their mediocre ribs in cities all over the country.

Unfortunately, the best barbecue in the Twin Cities opened and closed so fast that most people never got there. It was **Big Daddy’s** in Union Station in St. Paul. Sad, really. We managed to get there twice before it closed due to some kind of family illness.

Rudolph’s Barbecue

1933 Lyndale Ave S, Minneapolis
W Franklin & Lyndale Ave S
612-871-8969

BBQ

Zagat’s: F-20, D-17, S-18, C-\$18
NR, TO, GE, FP, FB, L, D, LL, LLL,
KF

Famous Dave's BBQ and Blues

Calhoun Square, 3001 Hennepin
Ave S, Minneapolis
W Lake St & Hennepin Ave S
612-822-9900

BBQ

Zagat's: unrated
NR, TO, GE, PP, FB, L, D, LL, LLL,
LM, KF, GG, BA, MS

Market Bar-B-Que

1414 Nicollet Ave, Minneapolis
W 14 St & Nicollet Ave
612-872-1111

BBQ

Zagat's: F-18, D-14, S-17, C-\$17
RL, TO, GE, FP, FB, L, D, LL, LLL

Ted Cook's 19th Hole Barbeque

2814 E 38 St, Minneapolis
28th Ave S & E 38th St
612-721-2023

BBQ

TO, L, D, NCC

Pickled Parrot

26 N 5th St, Minneapolis
1st Ave N & N 5th St
612-332-0673

Caribbean, Southwestern, Ribs

Zagat's: F-21, D-19, S-18, C-\$20
RR, TO, GE, PP, DB, SB, L, D, LL

Scott Ja Ma-Ma's Barbeque

3 W Diamond Lake Rd, Minneapolis
Nicollet Ave & W Diamond Lake Rd
612-823-4450

BBQ

Zagat's: F-21, D-9, S-19, C-\$13
TO, DL, L, D, TOO, SF, NCC

Basil's

Remember "The Mary Tyler Moore Show"? It was filmed in Minneapolis. Remember the bit during the opening credits where Mary and Rhoda sat dining together, on a balcony overlooking a courtyard? That was the Crystal Court in the IDS Center. The restaurant is still there; it's now called **Basil's**. The table they sat at is enshrined with a plaque. You can even sit there.

But just don't order any of the food.

We like to believe we're hearty souls. We've braved all kinds of restaurants for this guide. We've eaten lots of unmemorable meals. But you can't pay us enough to eat at this place.

But luckily, other intrepid explorers have gone before. Dara Moskowitz writes: "The appetizer of artichoke lemon fritters (\$6.95) were greasy balls of deep fried batter, semi-attached to tasteless artichoke bottoms; another appetizer of white truffle ravioli (\$8.25) was so freezer-burned that the fillings tasted like truffled ground memo pads. An entrée of polenta-dusted halibut (\$16.95) was the best thing; the fish was tender and the smoked-tomato Provençal sauce that surrounded it was merely salty and inoffensive. But it was the lemon linguini (\$9.95) that put me off the joint for good. Painfully salty, bright-pink smoked chicken butted heads with an oil slick of air freshener tasting lemon-sauce. Ugh."

And the *Star Tribune*: "The obligatory shrimp appetizer (\$8.95) was rendered as six small grilled shrimp with a lively pineapple avocado salsa, minus any trace of avocado. Pleasant, but puzzling. Lukewarm wild rice chowder is also

obligatory on Minnesota hotel dining-room menus, but Basil's creamy version was utterly generic. Best of the entrées was a generous portion of fresh polenta-crusted halibut with asparagus, served over a smoked tomato sauce (\$17.95). Otherwise, the fare seldom rose above adequate—the pork tenderloin (\$15.95) came with an agreeable fennel slaw, but the meat was too dry and the gnocchi were gummy. The rack of baby lamb (\$19.95) consisted of two double chops, served medium-rare as requested, accompanied by a rather acidic tomato anchovy confit.”

We could reprint more reviews along these lines, but why bother?

Basil's

710 Marquette Ave, Minneapolis
Marquette Ave & 7th St
612-376-7404

Eclectic, International

Zagat's F-20, D-21, S-20, C-\$21
RR, PP, FB, B, L, D, SA, R, LM, SF

Brasserie Zinc

This is a new restaurant, a “Mediterranean brasserie.” **Brasserie Zinc.** We haven't been here yet, warned off by several mixed reviews. Some dishes are good, mostly seafood. Everyone raves about the mussels, served in butter, herbs, and wine. Order them with *frites* so you can soak up the sauce. The oysters are fresh and good (avoid the oyster cocktail). The *bouillabaisse* gets high marks. And the lunch sandwiches look and taste like they came off the streets of Paris: not as good as they could be, but better than a lot of things served in this country.

But then Dara Moskowitz says this: “. . . a number of dishes you'd eat your beret to avoid. Zinc's litany of shame includes chewy steak tartare (\$10.95), an awful offering mysteriously drained of beef flavor; unbeefy and acrid onion soup (\$4.95); bland, watery bouillabaisse (\$16.95) made with overcooked fish; and even a clumsy *tarte Tatin* (\$4) presented with none of the caramelized top that makes the upside-down apple tart distinct. The odd version here is more like poached, spiced apples in crust. Yuck, too, to the coulibiac (\$15.95), a Friday-night special of salmon and rice cooked with herbs in brioche dough until exhausted and gummy. And off with the heads of 'Les Frères' (\$16.95), a bizarrely tasteless dish of sliced hanger steak and crisped short ribs presented with mashed potatoes and bitter, unpleasant onion ragout.”

Other reviewers have insulted the *escargot*, *pissaladiere*, *brandade*, squash ravioli, rack of lamb, *les freres*, cold seafood platter, and *charcuterie* plate. Absolutely everyone insults the *tarte Tatin*: “a very limp American-style apple pie,” “gummy.”

Everyone agrees that a highlight of Brasserie Zinc is the drinks. Lots of French and Belgian beers on tap, interesting mixed drinks and liqueurs, and a good wine list.

And everyone agrees that the ambiance makes the place. Brasserie Zinc looks like the casual French restaurant it's trying to be, from the hand-carved bar to the live music to the white tiles and mirrors to the aproned waiters.

So go, order wisely, and have a good time. We'll be along shortly.

Brit's Pub

Real or fake? Is **Brit's Pub** an authentic British pub experience transplanted to the Midwest, or a newfangled American bar with pretensions? To research this pressing question, we enlisted the aid of a handy British person named Maureen who was in for a visit.

Actually, we enlisted a lot of people: six at our table, and three others nearby. We studied the menu, ate the food, and drank the beer. Quick summary: it's not really a British pub, and the food still isn't very good.

"Pubness" first. Never mind the Midwest accents. It's too big, too clean, too open, too bright, and too airy. And it's not smoky enough. There is authentic British-like stuff strewn about: cricket magazines on tables, a likeness of the Queen Mum over the fireplace, assorted posters of British beers and the Beatles. Of the many flags hanging from the ceiling, a few were from Commonwealth countries. There is a bar, but Maureen pronounced it distinctly un-British—back home she would have elbowed her way up for a drink before grabbing a table. "Please wait to be seated" is about as un-pub-like as it gets.

Next, the menu. British items are on the menu of course—fish and chips, pot pies, bangers and mash—but the details gave it away. Meatloaf on a pub menu? Never. A Stilton burger? A true Brit would never touch it. There's not enough fried food. And why aren't peas served with everything? Maureen took one look at the British beer list and said: "Most of these I wouldn't cross the street for." Oh well.

Perhaps the most authentic aspect of the place is that most of the food isn't very good. The fish and chips are mediocre, the lamb kabobs okay. Both the steak and kidney pie and the shepherd's pie are serviceable, but not very tasty. The bangers and mash is fine, such as it is. Probably the best thing at both tables was the portobello sandwich: good, but as trendy un-British as you'll find.

Things took a turn for the worse when we ordered dessert. Our waitress, realizing that we were in the company of an actual Brit and were paying close attention to the Britishness of the joint, warned us that the trifle was not traditional. It wasn't. The bread pudding was closer to traditional, and tasted okay at that.

Service was extremely slow. We were there on Saturday night, but that's not really an excuse for the waitress denying how slow things had gone when we asked about it. And they automatically add the tip in for large parties; that threw us when we were dividing up the check.

So our experience wasn't very good, but that didn't stop the place from taking "Best Pub" honors in the 2001 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers' poll. Sometimes we wonder about the readers of that magazine.

Brit's Pub

1110 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis
 S 11th St & Nicollet Mall
 612-332-3908

English, American

Zagat's: F-16, D-22, S-17, C-\$16
 TO, PP, FB, L, D, LL, LLL, Da, P,
 AT, OS, PW, T

Bruegger's

The bagel's humble origins are the ghettos of Eastern Europe about 300 years ago. Around the turn of the century, Polish Jews brought the recipe to this country: mix high-gluten flour, yeast, sugar, and water; hand roll the dough; immerse the bagels in boiling water for a minute or two; dunk them in cold water; then bake them in a 500-degree oven for 15 minutes.

That's a bagel. It shines. It resists when you try to pull it apart. It has a hard crust. It is not a sandwich bread. Anything else is a bagel-shaped roll.

According to the Rabbinical Council of 1973, there are only seven types of bagels: poppy, sesame, salt, onion, pumpernickel, egg, and plain. Anything else is an abomination of nature and deserveth of ridicule.

That being said, the world abounds with bagel-shaped rolls and abominations of nature. Chains like Noah's Bagels sell steamed bagels instead of boiled ones. Steaming does make for a better sandwich bread, but it does not make for a better bagel. Bizarre flavorings—raisin, blueberry, whole wheat, nuts—are very popular. Many bagel bakers dye their bagels green for St. Patrick's Day. (The city of Chicago dyes its river green, but that doesn't make it right.)

Bruce has not found any good bagels in the Twin Cities. This is not to say that there aren't any—we have not made an exhaustive search—but they're certainly not obvious. Most don't boil the bagels. Some use the traditional cooking process, but mess up on the ingredients. Bruegger's is a prime example; they don't use a high-gluten flour, so the bagels feel wrong and taste funny. We don't even want to talk about supermarket bagels.

Karen's less fussy, and is happy to recommend Bruegger's. Located all around town, there's one within walking distance of the hotel. They have a variety of different bagels, available either in a bag or ready-made as a sandwich. They have all sorts of different spreads, and you can also buy smoked salmon.

The next time they're in New York, Bruce is going to take Karen to H&H Bagels East, on 2nd Avenue. Now *that's* a bagel.

Bruegger's

Gaviidae Common, Minneapolis
 Nicollet Mall & S 6th St
 612-339-3311

Bagels

TO, PP, B, L, D, SA, NCC

Buca

Buca is an institution; it's a family Italian restaurant with a couple of locations around the Twin Cities and elsewhere in the country, including a newish one in downtown Minneapolis. It's crowded and it's loud and the food is plentiful. Large groups are welcome, encouraged even. This is not the place for singleton diners. This is where you want to go for great whomping amounts of American-style Italian food.

Everything is served family-style, which means that you get a huge bowl or platter of what you ordered (everything is à la carte), and you serve yourselves. The servers, in our experience, overestimate the portions, and this is especially true if you're ordering several entrées. When they say that an entrée serves 2–3, what they mean is that it serves 4–5 hungry people, or 2–3 people over the course of several days. Happily, you can take the leftovers home, and Italian food always reheats well.

The food is good enough, though unspectacular. The preparations are uninspired and offend no one. Make sure to order the garlic mashed potatoes, one of the real delights on the menu. We think it's all a little salty; an hour after eating at Buca, we're thirsty. And go early if you've got a big group; they get busy.

For some reason, we've only gone to Buca with Karen's family. Don't despair; we believe that it is fully possible to go to Buca without Karen's family. But it's the kind of restaurant you'd want to go to with *someone's* family.

Buca di Beppo

11 S 12th St, Minneapolis
Harmon Place & S 12th St
612-288-0138

Italian

Zagat's: F-20, D-21, S-20, C-\$18
FP, FB, BA, TO, OS, D, GG, KF, PW

Cafe Brenda

Cafe Brenda is one of the anchors of the Minneapolis Warehouse District night life revival, and has been open for at least ten years. Brenda (who was hosting the night we dropped in) serves vegetarian food, using one of the looser definitions of “vegetarian”—chicken, fish, and dairy are on the menu. (But the chicken is free range, meaning that it was happy when it was alive, so it's okay.) It's not a large room, but it has high warehouse ceilings and the tables are not crowded together, so it feels more spacious than it is.

This is good food. It seems that everything that could be organic is, with ingredient choices straight from the shelves of your neighborhood co-op. The menu has all the flair of 60s hippie cuisine, and the preparations are clearly done by cooks who know and love wonderful meals.

The mushroom pâté appetizer was served warm and we liked it a little better than Karen's homemade version. The *soba* appetizer was quite tasty, though some of us thought the sauce a bit too creamy. Bruce tried the shrimp que-

sadilla, which had big pieces of shrimp and nicely flavorful *poblano* peppers. And the appetizer special that evening, the potato gnocchi, was delicious.

The gnocchi is a fine example of the level of detail Cafe Brenda cares about. In Argentina, there is a custom of eating gnocchi on the 29th of every month. It's because by that point in the month everyone is assumed to have run out of grocery money for anything more elaborate than potato dumplings. Even now, when the Argentines have pegged their currency to the dollar and no longer have bouts of runaway inflation, this charming and careful custom continues. Every restaurant has gnocchi on the menu on the 29th. We ate at Cafe Brenda on January 29th.

Our dinner course was all very good, including a delicate rainbow trout; that evening's special, the skate; another special, the mushroom wild rice loaf (which was different than, but just as good as the mushroom *pâté*, and which gave Karen some new ideas in tinkering with that mushroom *pâté* recipe); and the *sozai*.

No, we don't know what *sozai* means. It's a vegan treat, though, and is a whole plate full of stuff: organic brown rice, *natto* miso, savory ginger maple red beans, broccoli, *arame* (some shreddy stuff with sesame seeds), marinated tofu, "vegetable" (we assume this changes every day), red cabbage salad, and a root vegetable purée. At this meal, the purée was sweet potato. See what we mean about co-op cooking?

But everything was fresh, well-prepared, and simple. Cafe Brenda is a treat.

We had dessert, too. The dessert tray featured five items, so we ordered them all. The banana mousse was made with dried bananas, which gave it a different flavor than fresh fruit would have. We assume it's easier to get a strong banana taste with dried fruit, and this was very flavorful and smooth. The apple crisp was a little soggy, though again was nicely flavorful. The pumpkin-hazelnut roulade was a roll of fluffy-tasting stuff, with a layer of pumpkin cake in it. We would have liked the pumpkin cake by itself. The chocolate pot-de-creme was a disappointment, with nothing much to recommend it. Barb has tried it there on previous occasions and claimed this batch was off, and that it can be quite good. And then there was the passion fruit-coconut pie. Order this. It's a thin layer of intense citrus topped with big coconut chips. The pastry is good enough to eat alone.

Cafe Brenda is for those of us who've traded Birkenstocks for high heels, at least sometimes. It's run by people who probably ate healthy through college when they were poor and didn't know how to cook, decided they liked it, then suddenly became able to buy good ingredients and learned how to cook. It was voted "best vegetarian" by the readers of *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* and *Minnesota Monthly*, and the writers of this restaurant guide.

Cafe Brenda

300 1st Ave N, Minneapolis
N 3rd St & 1st Ave N
612-342-9230

Vegetarian, Healthy

Zagat's: F-24, D-22, S-22, C-\$22
RR, TO, FP, BW, L, D, R, SF, GA

Café della Vita

Certainly one of the hardest to find downtown Minneapolis restaurants, **Café della Vita** serves an eclectic mix of Asian, French, and American food. The restaurant is in the Minneapolis Grand Hotel, second floor (up the stairs and around the corner).

We visited on a Wednesday night. We had reservations, but we needn't have bothered. The restaurant was deserted, with maybe two other tables filled. The quiet elegance—dark wood, carpeting, smoked glass between sections, understated lighting—felt like something out of a gangster movie. This was made even more eerie by the waitstaff regularly peeking out the windows.

The restaurant and hotel are in the digs of the former Minneapolis Athletic Club, the sort of place that doesn't have people like us as members, which may well be why they closed down. At any rate, we were handed out menus and left alone.

In good time our waitress peeked out the window and took our order. (We were seated by a window.) Then our food arrived.

The starters run heavily towards seafood. There's Blue Point oysters on the half-shell, sautéed mussels, and sushi. If you want Japanese, you can start with miso soup or shrimp and vegetable tempura. There are also salads.

There were three of us. Our guest ordered the spider scallops: "Diver Sea Scallops Wrapped in Angel Hair, Deep Fried, Served with Lobster Sauce and Basil Vinaigrette." This dish was flavorful and balanced. A small salad served with the dish made it even more so. Bruce ordered the eggroll, which was an interesting Hispanic adaptation of the form: "Deep Fried Egg Paper Rolled with Black Beans, Guacamole, Cilantro, Sundried Tomato, Orange Jalapeno Sweet and Sour Sauce." Think of a spring roll—burrito cross; tasty, but nothing special.

Karen ordered the ceviche: "Marinated Sea Bass, Shrimp, Sea Scallops with extra Virgin Olive Oil, Onions, Habanero Pepper Parsley and Lime-Lemon Juice." This was the strangest of the lot. It was served in a parfait glass... no, it was in a half coconut in a parfait glass. A frozen half coconut. It's a clever idea, but the frozen coconut froze the fish about halfway through the course. It didn't work at all.

More peeking out the window—we were peeking ourselves by this time—and the entrées arrived. Our guest ordered the "Stone Crab Ravioli: Large Ravioli stuffed with Florida Stone Crab Meat, Shrimp, Lobster Cream." It was okay, but nothing special. The lobster cream sauce was good. Bruce ordered the Plum Duck: "Pan-seared Duck Breast Fanned out with Caramelized Belgium Endives, Mashed Sweet Potato, Marjoram Honey Balsamic Sauce." This was the winner. It was flavorful without being heavy and overbearing. The sauce was delicious, as were the sweet potatoes. Karen's Sesame Tuna was the weakest. The menu pitched it as "Sesame Crusted Tuna Steak with Shiitake Sticky Rice, Yellow and Red Bell Pepper, Green Onion with Soy Reduction and Wasabi." It was okay, but nothing special.

Other entrées ran the gamut from basic—prime rib—to esoteric: Veal Scallopini with Roast Japanese Eggplant, Tomato and Swiss Cheese Wine Sauce, Mashed Potato and Crispy Leeks. The most worrisome entrée had “Grilled Indonesian Jurassic Shrimp” as an ingredient: we had no idea how large those shrimp would be.

After our table was cleared and we were finishing our coffee, we finally asked. There was a pro-basketball team staying at the hotel—the Miami Heat—and everyone was watching for their bus to arrive. We weren’t impressed with the fuss; they’re good but nothing special, only third in the Atlantic Division. But everyone was talking about them, and wondering what particular doorways or light fixtures were tall enough. When we left, we saw a pile of large suitcases and duffel bags in the lobby. We guess they weren’t interested in food.

Café della Vita

Minneapolis Grand Hotel
615 2nd Ave S, Minneapolis
612-752-9595

Eclectic, International

RL, VP, FB, D, GG

Café Havana

Minneapolis hosts a science fiction convention every year on Easter weekend (it was the original impetus for this restaurant guide). One of the important things about this convention is the hospitality suite. One of the things regularly available in the hospitality suite is condoms. They’re usually in a large bowl on some table somewhere. It looks kind of pretty: brightly colored packages all in a pile.

One year, no one remembered to buy the condoms. So Friday afternoon, Karen and a friend flagged down a taxi, and had the great good fortune of being able to tell the cab driver, “Take us to SexWorld. Quick! We need 500 condoms.” “Well,” he said, looking them over, “this is Good Friday.”

Conveniently located next door to SexWorld is **Café Havana**. The two couldn’t be more different. Café Havana is swank, with a dark wooden bar that looks just perfect for power imbibing. In the back, there’s a restaurant, looking almost like an afterthought. And the food amply illustrates that. It’s not bad, just uneven.

The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* did a more thorough job than we did with the menu, so we’ll quote from them: “Both *pollo asado*, an oven-roasted half-chicken served with mashed yuca, and *pollo achioté*, braised chicken with beans and rice, are fine comfort-food dinners, reminiscent of what made the Mendozas’ menu so appealing.

“*Chuletas de puerco*, pork chops broiled with a tomatillo-chipotle sauce, are a little tough, but flavorful. *Coo-coo con camarones*, a big plate of plump grilled shrimp, are served with a slightly sweet marinade and a side of the kitchen’s nicely rendered cornmeal okra. *Cena de legumbres*, a platter of grilled vegetables, is equally appealing.

“Unfortunately, there are misses. Paella, a heaping platter of saffron rice dotted with shrimp, mussels, clams, chicken and chorizo, is drop-dead gorgeous. But when I tried it, it was dry, low on flavor and overpriced at \$25 per person.

“*Costillas en barbacoa* (smoked pork ribs), coated with a faint guava sauce, were overcooked. A big bowl of mussels were rubbery. Tuna, paired with a boring papaya salsa, had languished too long on the grill.

“Appetizers also were a roller coaster. The mixed green salad was tossed with a perky mango-pistachio dressing. *Camarones adobados picantes*, citrus-flavored shrimp, were delicious and plentiful.

“But the lobster cake, a mushy mess served on a fried tortilla, was a disaster. Plantanos, the less-sweet sibling to the banana, were served two ways: fried and double-fried. Choose the former. A generous plate of chopped crab had almost no flavor, and the accompanying avocado and mango were both under-ripe.”

Service is great. We found the waitstaff friendly and efficient, and generally enjoyed their company. But we were there primarily for drinks and its proximity to SexWorld, both of which make it an interesting destination.

Café Havana

119 Washington Ave N, Minneapolis
612-338-8484

Cuban

RR, FB, D, LL, LLL, GG, R

Café Un Deux Trois

Think loud, bustling bistro. Think high ceilings, dim mood lighting, and a long, dark bar. Think live jazz on Friday nights. Think dramatic *trompe l'oeil* décor, white tablecloths, well-dressed waiters. Now think noisy, very noisy. The waiters have perfected an odd attitude: attentive but indifferent, nice but snotty. The tables are covered with paper over cloth, and there are crayons on the table, which we appreciated, as we doodled while we waited for our food. And did we mention the noise?

Café Un Deux Trois serves upscale Euro pub food: onion soup, *salade Nicoise*, pâté, snails in garlic sauce, steamed mussels in white wine sauce, Brie sandwiches, “steak frites,” omelets. Everything you’d expect if you wandered into a random lunch restaurant in France or Belgium.

The menu is spare: half a dozen appetizers, some salads, and about a dozen entrées. Every review we’ve seen loves this place, so we’re willing to accept that we visited on an off day. Karen had a *salade Nicoise*, which somehow wasn’t quite as good as she wanted it to be. (We’ve had them all over France and Belgium, and are used to wide quality swings.) Oddly, in this day of “lite” foods, a slightly heavier dressing would have been more nearly perfect.

Bruce had an open-face steak sandwich: not very interesting, with okay mashed potatoes and odd-textured gravy. Reviews we’ve read gush about the duck *a l’orange*, roasted chicken with risotto, braised lamb shank with garlic mashed potatoes, and steak tartare. The crème brûlée we shared was competent, but not nearly as special as the waiter promised. “Best in town,” he told

us. But where were the vanilla bean seeds one finds in the lovely crème brûlée at Chez Colette? (It's in Bloomington... too far to be worth the trip; pity, that.) The chef has an impressive pedigree. Vincent Francoual was trained in France and was the *chef de partie* at Lespinasse and the *sous chef* at Le Bernadin, both top New York restaurants. But his title at Café Un Deux Trois is “executive chef,” which may mean that he does more overseeing and less cooking.

Café Un Deux Trois is two blocks from the Hilton, in the Foshay Tower, making it an obvious choice for an upscale meal. Reservations are recommended, especially for large parties. And it's not cheap: figure \$25 per person for dinner, and maybe \$15 for lunch.

The 2001 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers' poll rates this the second-best French food in Minneapolis. *City Pages* calls this place “part Patee, part New York, but also part Minneapolis.” We suppose...

Café Un Deux Trois

Foshay Tower
114 S 9 St, Minneapolis
2nd Ave & S 9th St
612-673-0686

French

Zagat's: F-24, D-21, S-21, C-\$29
RR, TO, PP, FB, L, D, SA, R, GA

Carvers—in the Hilton

Maybe it was increased sunspot activity. Maybe the Illuminati were sending everyone subliminal messages through their dental fillings. Maybe the good chef takes Tuesdays off. We can't think of any other reason for the mediocre meal we got. *Zagat's* raves over **Carvers**, and we figured that the “good” restaurant in the Hilton would be good indeed. We were disappointed.

We split a couple of appetizers. The Duck Trap River Salmon (huh?) came without the caviar specified on the menu. When we got the waiter's attention we had him bring it separately. But the time he returned, we'd finished the rest of the dish, which was inoffensive but tasty. Karen and our daughter Jenny Baker thought that the baked portobello mushroom appetizer was delicious; Bruce was less impressed.

Two of us ordered that evening's special, the bouillabaisse. It was greasy and not as flavorful as we would have liked. Jenny ordered the Grilled Jumbo Shrimp and Canadian Lobster Tails. The gluey mango sauce was a bit much for this first-time lobster taster; neither did it impress either Karen or Bruce.

The rest of the menu is typical high-end sounding meat, chicken, and fish, about what you'd expect at a hotel restaurant: grilled pork medallions wrapped in bacon, veal scaloppini, New York strip steak, grilled chicken, rack of lamb, grilled ribeye steak, mahi-mahi, jumbo shrimp, baked walleye. There's also a handful of soups and salads, and a few inoffensive-looking appetizers. The menu is posted outside; take a look at it when you walk by. Bruce has seen pretty much the exact same menu in more hotels in more cities than he is willing to admit to.

The dessert tray leaned heavily in the direction of raspberries, which we favor. The three of us split something nice with ladyfingers soaked in Grand Marnier. The pastry chef had clearly been experimenting with the concept of tiramisù; it was quite good.

The service was okay, in an offhand way. One of our places had been set with a bent fork. We were given fish forks for the tidy salmon rolls on the appetizer, but not for the more challenging bouillabaisse. The waiter was kind enough not to tell us his name, but insisted on interrupting our conversation to see if everything was all right.

It's a pretty room. We place it at about a seven on the high-concept "meat and power dinner" scale of restaurant décor. Think art glass, dark green walls, lots of wood, and deep red carpet. But that doesn't make up for the indifferent food and so-so service. At \$10.00 for an appetizer, and entrées in the \$30.00 range, you should be able to count on a better meal.

Carver's

Minneapolis Hilton
1001 Marquette Ave, Minneapolis
10th St & Marquette Ave
612-397-4829

Continental

Zagat's: F-24, D-24, S-24 C-\$32
RR, PP, VP, FB, L, D, SA, GA

Chatterbox Pub

There's a class of public house, distinctly Minnesotan, called a "3.2 bar." 3.2 bars have a license to serve drinks that have no more than 3.2% alcohol. (As a point of comparison, normal beer is 5%–6% alcohol, and table wine is about twice that.) 3.2 malt beverages are legally defined as "non-intoxicating."

Karen spent her formative drinking years in Minnesota, and is better able to speak about 3.2 bars: Liquor laws are locally controlled and the regional variations make no sense when looked at closely. That may be true for other places; it is certainly true in Minnesota. The local liquor laws are both provincial and archaic, with a fistful of Mama-knows-best thrown in for good measure.

There are bars in Minneapolis, generally in residential neighborhoods, that only serve 3.2 beer. They're indistinguishable from other bars, except that maybe there'll be a long wait to get into the rest room. You *can* catch a buzz on 3.2, but you have to drink a lot of it. I've known 3.2 bars that also serve "set-ups." This means that you can bring your own bottle, even gin or whisky, and they'll sell you the soda or Coke or whatever to mix it with. I suppose you should first ask if you want to bring your own bottle into a 3.2 bar.

Some restaurants, even some in downtown Minneapolis, have a beer and wine license only. They serve what's called "strong beer" and wine, but no spirits. And some restaurants have "off-sale" licenses, which means that they can sell you liquor, wine, or beer to drink off their premises.

The only other place to buy real liquor in Minnesota is a liquor store. Strong beer, wine, and spirits are only sold at liquor stores, never in groceries or con-

venience stores. You'll see beer on the shelves in those stores, but only 3.2, or perhaps the alcohol-free stuff. And even 24-hour grocery stores cannot sell you non-intoxicating 3.2 beer after 1 AM, when the bars have closed.

We tell you all of this for no particular reason; most of the bars in downtown Minneapolis are regular bars with licenses to sell strong beer, wine, and distilled liquor. But if you venture outside of downtown, you might run into a neighborhood 3.2 bar. Remember to pronounce it "three-two," ignoring the dot, and you'll be fine.

And if you want a halfway decent meal with your watery beer, visit the Chatterbox Pub. It's simple stuff: sandwiches, burgers, fries. Most everything is serviceable, although nothing to make the trip for. Don't order the garlic-dill potatoes. And try their special 3.2 microbrew: Chatterbox Lager. It's actually good.

And be sure to tell your friends back home that you went to a real live 3.2 bar.

Chatterbox Pub

2229 E 35 St., Minneapolis
612-728-9871

American

NR, 32B, L, D, LL, LLL, LM, GD,
VG

Chez Bananas

Ax Man is a techie pilgrimage destination at 1639 University Ave., in St. Paul. They feature an ever-changing array of wonderful consumer and industrial surplus merchandise. If you've never seen one before, don't know what it is, and cannot possibly live without it, you probably found it at Ax Man.

Sister Fun is the Ax Man of weird little toys. This is our best source for fortune-telling fish, weather-predicting postcards, glass Christmas pickles, Old Faithful stickers, tiny plastic babies, and hundreds of objects which must be seen to be properly cherished. Sister Fun is somehow related to the other Fun stores: Big Fun near Cleveland and Uncle Fun in Chicago. They all have much the same weird stuff.

Usefully located right next door to where Sister Fun was before the fire last year, **Chez Bananas** may well buy its toys there. Certainly they share the silliness meme. You'll find a Magic 8-ball and an Etch A Sketch on the tables at Chez Bananas. And, we must admit, we liked playing with toys while we waited for our food.

Chez Bananas is a Caribbean restaurant, telegraphed by both the décor and the menu. The fishnets of plastic fish are sort of cute, and there aren't so many other tropical trappings that one fears every last menu item will be served with a little parasol stuck in it. Karen, who has a great distrust of theme restaurants, pronounces it mostly harmless.

The menu is short and sweet, with a three-level "banana rating system." Items marked with one banana are "mildly spicy," two bananas denote food which is "spicy and hot," while three bananas mark their most dangerous "very spicy and very hot dishes." It's a nice way of catering to the average patron's phobia

of spicy food, a fear so rampant here in the Twin Cities that Pace Picante Sauce invented an “Extra Mild” version just for this market.

We tried the jerked chicken breast sandwich, a one-banana item that was, as our waitress promised, flavorful without being hot. It comes served on a French roll, and is a little hard to eat because of it, but the complex marinade (soy, olive oil, vinegar, orange and lime juice, scotch bonnet peppers, onions, cayenne, sage, nutmeg, cinnamon, and garlic) produced a tasty sandwich with lots of flavor and little heat. The salad of the day was a hot potato salad flavored with cumin, which was okay, although the portion was too much of a good thing.

The bananaless rice and bean quesadilla was perfectly nice, and came served with a generous side of good, spicy red tomato salsa. It’s big enough to take half home for later. For an extra dollar you can get this item with cilantro pesto, an idea we endorse. Cornbread sticks are served for while-you-wait nibbling, and they, too, are a little spicy without being anywhere near overwhelming.

We had a quick lunch there one weekday, and the place was not crowded. The service was fast, the waitress was thoughtful and efficient, and we got in and out quickly.

Chez Bananas brings a cautious taste of spicy Caribbean-inspired cuisine to timid Midwestern palates and does a nice job of it. They’ve been around for ages. We aren’t surprised. At lunch prices in the \$5–\$8 range, and dinners ranging all the way from \$7.50 to \$20, we’ll be back. It’s probably one of the better food values in the city.

Chez Bananas

129 N 4th St, Minneapolis
2nd Ave N & N 4th St
612-340-0032

Caribbean

Zagat’s: F-21, D-20, S-19, C-\$19
NR, TO, GE, PP, FB, L, D, GD

Chinese

Ping’s doesn’t deserve to be a good Chinese restaurant. It’s flashy, upscale, and pink. It caters to tourists. Its advertising screams: “Chinese food for Midwesterners who want to appear sophisticated.” But oddly enough, the food is good.

The Chinese crispy duck was probably the best, tasty and served with bok choy, mushrooms, broccoli and pea pods. We also liked Ping’s special noodles, a shrimp/chicken/pork combination dish over crispy lo mein noodles with assorted vegetables. King Jang chicken (available on the takeout menu but not the dining room menu, but if you ask nicely they’ll make it) is also good; it’s similar to General Tso’s chicken, but with hoisin sauce and more vegetables. And their *moo shu* (we tried both the shrimp and the chicken) is good, which is rare in Chinese restaurants these days. We were surprised and delighted by the chicken puffs, an appetizer of fried won tons stuffed with curried chicken: yum.

Spicy isn't very spicy; even the dishes with the warning labels were mild. They offer pepper sauce (what Karen calls "hot seeds") under the irritating trade name of "Ping's Zing," which was better than nothing.

Unfortunately, the food is about all we liked. The service was abysmal, every aspect of it. The hostess did a lousy job of seating people: putting pairs at four-tops, fours at larger tables, seating people randomly so wasting the maximum tables to combine for larger parties, misguessing waiting times, and so on. They don't take same-day reservations, and if you're a large party you won't get seated quickly. The smoking section is too near the nonsmoking section, and too near the door. We were surprised by how small the place is.

Service got worse once we sat down. Ping's philosophy, as written on their menu, is: "Happiness shared is happiness multiplied! We encourage you to share your appetizers and entrées with others at your table." But they don't bring pots of tea to the table (they claim there are only two tea pots in the entire restaurant); they force people to wait for individual refills. And wait. We also waited for water refills, spoons, chopsticks, and sauces. We beat the game by snitching the sugar from another table, which was smart because the waitress never did bring any. Karen is entirely unsympathetic to servers who, when asked for something, wander off and come back to the table sometime later without the requested item. This is, she thinks, one of the red flags of Bad Service. We waited to have the rest of our order taken and we waited for our food. (Karen believes that our waitress punched our order in late; Bruce misses these restaurant logistics nuances.)

Ping's has received the occasional "best Chinese" award from *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine*. At \$10–\$15 per entrée, it's more expensive than the average neighborhood Chinese dive, and while the food is good, it doesn't seem worth it.

Ping's is close to the Hilton. They will deliver at a 10% surcharge. We think your best bet is to skip the 10%, skip the terrible servers, and get takeout. And if you're a gawky Midwestern tourist, they also sell T-shirts (as seen on the busboys), ball caps, jackets, shot glasses, and something called "Ping's Pleasure Glass," which we refused to even look at.

Rainbow is our Chinese restaurant. On the random Friday night we visited in order to write this review, three of the tables were filled with people we knew. It's noisy, bustling, and crowded on weekends (although tables turn quickly, and the wait usually isn't very long). But the service is quick, the food is delicious, and the prices are reasonable. If it were walking distance from the hotel, it would be perfect. (It's a five-minute drive or cab ride.)

The menu is heavy on noodles. They serve *mein*, *mei fun*, and *chow fun*, all pan fried with a variety of toppings and seasonings. (One of our correspondents recommended the chicken black bean *chow fun*, but warned against the *lo mein*.) They have noodle soups—*mein*, rice stick, and *mei fun*—again in several variations, and their hot and sour soup is probably the best in Minneapolis.

There also serve most traditional Chinese dishes, and several things that you don't generally see in American Chinese restaurants. We've had pickled mustard greens in Beijing, and served here with squid, pea pods, and tree mushrooms they were just as good. The beef with ginger root, bamboo shoots, black mushrooms, and scallions was delicious; the ginger root was not toned down for Westerners. The orange peel chicken was the weakest dish we've had there,

but what do you expect from a “Western” Chinese dish? Several dishes were served with *gai-lan*, the “Chinese broccoli” served with just about every meal in China.

We have a saying, “Most vegetarian cooking can be improved with the addition of a little meat.” Traditional Chinese cooking is true to this philosophy: meat is more a seasoning than a main ingredient. Rainbow caters to an American clientele (although there are plenty of Asian customers), and so puts more meat in their dishes, but the overall taste is true to this traditional spirit. And they offer many vegetarian entrées, including two vegetarian appetizers (rare in Chinese restaurants).

In 1999, *Gourmet Magazine* readers voted this the best value in the Twin Cities, and we won’t argue. We like this place. It’s a bit of China in Minnesota. And while you’re waiting, you can look at the traditional Buddhist shrine in the corner by the door. You’d think you were in China, except that, among the offerings of candles, fruit, and nuts, there’s a tin of Oblaten.

Over in Stadium Village, the **Village Wok** has gone through several quality swings since we’ve started paying attention: good, then bad, then good, then bad, and currently very very good. It’s another traditional Cantonese restaurant, usually filled with Chinese diners. Many of the most interesting specials are not on the menu, but on signs posted on all the walls: note the seafood dishes. Bruce loves the Dungeness crab in black bean sauce. Bruce loves, in fact, everything they serve in black bean sauce. And everything they serve with ginger scallion sauce. Most recently we ordered the oysters with ginger scallion sauce: unbelievable. They also do fine things with whole steamed fish, if a couple of you want to share. And our vegetarian friends can enjoy a meal here too. The service and the kitchen are both lightning fast and competent. One of the Village Wok’s many fine advantages is that they’re open late.

There are many other Chinese restaurants in the Twin Cities. For some reason **Leeann Chin** ends up on various “best” lists—it’s listed as the best Chinese restaurant and the best takeout in both the 1999, 2000, and 2001 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers’ poll, for example—although we have never heard anything good about it from someone who has actually eaten there. (There is a Leeann Chin in the International Center, one block north of the hotel. It’s open Monday through Friday for lunch only, though.)

Peking Garden is a ratty-looking establishment also in the University’s Stadium Village that serves the current local best dim sum on Saturdays and Sundays. Despite a recent coat of yellow paint, it looks kind of dirty. The service for dim sum ranges from mediocre to awful. However, every time we’ve eaten there, the food has been anywhere from pretty good to just delicious.

The carts come out at 11 AM on weekends, so getting there early is a good idea. The whole place will fill up. You early risers can, however, order the same yummy dim sum from the menu if you get there before 11. We think it’s a good sign that most of their customers are Chinese. This is certainly why the first cart past us last time offered, among other things, chicken feet. Americans don’t generally want the chicken feet.

We particularly like the big dishes of *gai-lan*, the bright green Chinese broccoli that is ubiquitous in China. The fried taro, in several preparations, is delicious, as is anything with shrimp. One friend reports that one of her co-workers and his Hong Kong-born wife claim Peking Garden’s radish cakes are

the best on the planet. If anything, we were surprised not to find more *shu mai* on offer. But dim sum is always something of a gamble and you choose from what rolls by. At \$36 for two adults and one kid with a tiny appetite, we found it an expensive brunch, but with the economies of scale of a large group, you should spend less.

Late-Breaking News: Ignore everything in this section. Don't go to any of these Chinese restaurants. Go to **Shuang Cheng**. All of you, just go (although not at the same time).

What can we tell you about this wonderful place? It looks like a typical family-run Chinese restaurant. The service is good, the food comes quickly, and the prices are reasonable. But what food!

Make sure you look at the specials board up on the wall. We're in love with the whole grilled sea bass, either with black bean sauce or scallion-and-ginger sauce. We also regularly order the plum duck (it's not crispy duck, but it's delicious), the seafood asparagus, and the mussels with black bean sauce (actually, anything with black bean sauce is great). The best thing we've found on the menu is the baked spicy scallops (surprising); also excellent are the beef with dried orange peel, the stuffed black mushrooms, and the Peking-style pork chops. The only thing less than perfect is the hot-and-sour soup, which is listed on the menu as sweet-and-sour soup. (Remember, though that this is a Cantonese restaurant. There are no pot stickers on the menu, and you shouldn't expect good hot-and-sour soup.) But even the sweet and sour chicken is acceptable, although we don't recommend ordering it. Seafood is the star at this restaurant. We're still working out way through the menu....

Ping's Szechuan Bar and Grill

1401 Nicollet Ave, Minneapolis
E 14 St & Nicollet Ave
612-874-9404

Chinese
Zagat's: F-19, D-18, S-18, C-\$18
RR, TO, DL, VP, FB, L, D, LL

Rainbow Chinese Restaurant

2739 Nicollet Ave, Minneapolis
28th St & Nicollet Ave
612-870-7084

Chinese
Zagat's: F-24, D-18, S-20, C-\$16
RL, TO, GE, FP, BW, L, D, LL, BSO

Village Wok

610 Washington Ave SE, Minneapolis
Union St SE & Washington Ave SE
612-331-9041

Chinese
Zagat's: F-21, D-8, S-14, C-\$12
TO, B, L, D, LL, LLL

Peking Garden

2324 University Ave SE, Minneapolis
University Ave SE & Washington Ave
SE
623-3989

Chinese
RL, TO, FP, BW, L, D, LL, LLL, GG

Shuang Cheng

1320 4th St SE, Minneapolis
4th St & 14th Ave SE
612-378-0208

Chinese
Zagat's: F-23, D-10, S-16, C-\$15
RL, BW, TO, L, D, LL, GG, GD, SF

Chino Latino

It's all about the drink monkeys.

Chino Latino has a lot to live up to, taking over the space of the late great Rainbow Bar, an extraordinarily perfect spot. Several other restaurants have attempted to use the front half of the place, as if Uptown needed a version of Annie's Parlour... sheesh. But the Rainbow Bar lived on, tucked into the back corner, a small dark place to step away from the oh-so-much Uptown crowd, the perfect place for afternoon cocktails or evening trysts. The bathrooms are semi-coed; you have to see your for yourself. The women's stalls had the best graffiti in town, except for the University of Minnesota campus.

But the Rainbow faded away when we weren't looking, along with whatever unnoticed restaurant was in the front space... and suddenly, we had a pot of gold. Outside, above the windows of Chino Latino, the Rainbow building is covered with what looks like gold coins rippling and shining in the wind. The door can be hard to spot, and there is no sign. You almost feel like you should have a password before trying the door, like there might be a slit in the door and some eyes peering out waiting to hear "Argic sent me."

Go ahead. Walk on in.

Chino Latino is a showcase of a restaurant. It's got an artily backlit bar (done in orange, which works somehow), it's got crowds and tables and noise and commotion. One back wall is covered with votive candles. You don't have to shout your way through dinner, but you'll think you did the week after. It has the attitude of being much noisier than it is. This is a see and be seen spot. The crowd is young, well-dressed, and having a wonderful time preening, flirting, and showing off. We think that can be fun to watch sometimes, but we go to Chino Latino for the food.

They call it "Food From the Hot Zones." We call it "ceviche and potstickers." The menu covers all the little bar food nibbles and larger entrees from your favorite Thai, Latin, Chinese, and Indonesian places, in portions to share. (The menu divides between "little dishes to share" and "big dishes to share." The long communal table downstairs is perfect to gather with as many of your friends as you care to bring, and pass around the plates. We like to order a lot of the small dishes and make dinner from that.

What do we like? Most everything. You can't go wrong with the smoked marlin tostada, the *ceviche con naranjas* (fish marinated in orange and lime juice, with hot peppers and red onion), the pot stickers, the "Lamma Island salty squid," the "Phuket fried noodles," or the "Philippine paella" (jumbo shrimp, adobo chicken, mussels, chorizo, calamari on a pile of saffron-anatto rice). The "bulgogi lettuce cup" is tasty. Any of the half-dozen satays are good. And if you order 72 hours in advance, they'll prepare a "Bali fertility feast"—"whole glazed suckling pig, well hung and roasted with tropical fried rice, wok fried vegetables and fiery peanut sauce"—for your party of ten or more. The pig arrives at your table with considerable fanfare, head and all.

Pass on the desserts.

The bar has the distinction of introducing the Pisco Sour to the Twin Cities. This cocktail is rarely seen outside its native Peru; indeed most folks have never heard of pisco. It's a distilled sugar cane spirit not unlike rum, but lighter and more citrus. While they are not cheap (\$9 per drink here, something like \$2 at better bars in Lima), they are the perfect hot zone cocktail, cool and interesting on the palate. And noise, attitude, and all, it fills the niche left by the Rainbow.

So, what about the drink monkeys? They're little plastic charms that arrive dangling off the rim of your glass. The original idea was that each little character would distinguish your drink from someone else's, a crucial skill we sometimes lose midway through an evening when we've had several. If you're just in for a single cocktail on the way to a movie, you can probably manage to keep track of your glass. But you get to take the drink monkeys home. We've met folks with bagsful.

Chino Latino

2916 Hennepin Ave S, Minneapolis
Hennepin Ave & Lake St
612-824-7878

Eclectic, International

RE, VP, FB, D, LL, LLL, SF, GG,
PW, T

D'Amico Cucina

The D'Amico empire includes a couple of "trattorias," the D'Amico & Sons delis, and the flagship restaurant: **D'Amico Cucina**. The delis are primarily takeout, and we understand they offer quite good Italian food at take-out prices. The trattorias are a dine-in setup where the food and the service are not on par with the Cucina, but are cheaper and easier to get a table at.

D'Amico Cucina has often been voted the top restaurant in the Twin Cities, and we're not surprised. The whole experience is marvelous. We've been there a few times and, as nearly as we could tell, the entire staff is delighted that each and every customer is there. They serve fresh and delicious food, present it well, and go out of their way to make us feel welcome. Our recent experience gave us a whole new yardstick by which to judge service.

We were warmly greeted and immediately shown to our table. The dining room is subdued but pretty; the carpeted floors and soft colors make it a nice atmosphere for conversation and relaxed dining. Though it's a fairly large space, the pillars throughout the room and the different levels break up both noise and sight lines. Though they were crowded and busy the night we were in, our experience felt intimate and relaxing. On the table next to ours, a bouquet of roses waited for a couple to arrive. (We don't know if he planned to ask her to marry him, but it wouldn't have surprised us in the least.) Across from us, a man sat alone and obviously enjoyed his meal very much. It's a quiet, comfortable place to relax and enjoy a delicious and leisurely meal.

The menu is traditional northern Italian with a modern flair. For example, the veal loin is served with both a traditional *amarone* sauce and a more modern potato prune gratin. The duck breast comes with polenta and a salad of Belgian endive, pear, and pear vinaigrette.

Another favorite is a fish special: grilled perch set on a bed of greens—endive, arugula—grilled red onions, and a Yukon Gold potato purée, drizzled with a blood orange and lemon vinaigrette. All the flavors blend marvelously

Actually, every dish we have ever had here has been a treat. They serve a roasted beet (that's beet, not beef) and goat cheese terrine, garnished with hazelnuts and balsamic vinegar, that is simply delicious.

Our favorite pasta dish was the gnocchi with lobster and a spinach fricassee with cock's comb. (That's one dish, by the way.) The sauce tasted of lemon, tarragon, mushrooms, and (of course) spinach. All the flavors were marvelous, and blended together nicely. Another entrée was the *orechiette* with honey-roasted chicken, spinach, preserved lemon, and black olive. Similar in spirit to the gnocchi, it was also delicious.

Sometimes the menu is tough to decipher. The dishes are listed in Italian, and then in English... but sometimes the English is also in Italian. For example, "Piadina con Gorgonzola, Prosciutto e Miele" is less-than-helpfully semi-translated as "Piadina with Gorgonzola Dolce, Pio Tosini Prosciutto and Warm Rosemary Honey." (In case you're interested, piadina is a hard flat bread. The gorgonzola cheese is warm, the prosciutto is delicious, and the whole plate is drizzled with honey. It's an antipasto, but it is so rich that it took three people to finish.) But our waiter was always willing to translate, explain, and recommend.

He was even willing to indulge. For whatever reason, when we were last there we chose not to buy a bottle of wine. D'Amico Cucina has an excellent selection of wines by the glass, but Karen was undecided as to what she wanted. The waiter queried her as to her preferences, and then brought two glasses and two bottles for her to taste—giving her a full glass of the one she preferred. Our waiter was possibly the best we've ever had in the Twin Cities. He was just fabulous.

We have ordered bottles off their wine list. The list is extensive, and a bit expensive. The Italian wines run the gamut of light whites to heavy reds, and the list changes regularly.

Desserts alone are a reason to visit D'Amico Cucina. (We've never visited just for dessert, but the restaurant assures us that we would be welcome.) Desserts are the usual Italian complications: roasted pear with balsamic caramel crème anglaise, linzer cookie, and red wine gelato; apple confit and chevre mousse *crostate* with black currant purée; that sort of thing. They're delicious. Even the simple desserts—a single scoop each of blood orange, raspberry, and blackberry sorbet—are so unbelievably clean and pure as to be worth the trip all by themselves.

But get the chocolate platter. This dessert, big enough for sharing, includes six different chocolate preparations: cakes, mousses, biscotti. These are probably the best chocolate desserts in the Twin Cities—Café Latte wins the readers' polls, but the readers have no idea what they're talking about.

D'Amico Cucina has been slipping in the various rankings recently, but that's because other restaurants are getting better and not because this restaurant is getting worse. It's a fine meal and a fine experience. And it's very reasonable for what you get.

News Flash: The main dining room closed for a week and a half in February. When it reopened, it had a new look and a new menu. All this is the work of new chef Seth Doherty, who took over the kitchen last December. The dinnerati are all abuzz about this, and expect great things. But press deadlines wait for no man and no remodeling project, so you're on your own.

D'Amico Cucina

Butler Square, 100 N 6th St,
Minneapolis
1st Ave N & N 6th St
612-338-2401

Italian

Zagat's: F-27, D-26, S-25, C-\$43
RE, PP, VP, FB, IWL, D, R, PW, SA

Dead Cows

Though we are the most omnivorous people we know, we don't eat a lot of steak. We certainly don't make a point of going out to a restaurant just to eat steak. In Argentina, they eat a lot of steak. Even more startling, when you order a steak in an Argentine restaurant, that's what you get: a hunk of cooked dead cow. No vegetables, no potatoes, no salad, just meat. And judging from the number of steak houses hereabouts, they eat a lot of it in Minneapolis as well.

The four big-deal steak houses are **Manny's**, **Murray's**, **Morton's of Chicago**, and **Ruth's Chris**. They're all classic steak houses: dark wood, over-cooked vegetables, stiff service. Manny's is generally considered to be the best of the four. The readers of *Mpls.St.Paul* rate them in this order: Murray's, Manny's, Ruth's Chris, and Timber Lodge (where did that come from?). Zagat's (which we have more faith in) rates them in this order: Manny's, Ruth's Chris, then Morton's and Murray's tied. The 2000 Zagat's Minneapolis guide, in its trademark "sound bites" style, says this about Manny's: "Everything a beef lover wants" arrives in abundance at this 'steakhouse Satyricon,' a 'noisy,' 'macho' Downtown 'powerhouse' where the 'fantastic' meat is delivered in 'insanely huge portions,' backed by 'perfect service'; it's 'expensive,' but porterhouse partisans proclaim that 'nobody does it better.'"

Wow.

They are a little less gushy about Ruth's Chris: "Smoke a cigar, cut a deal and chomp on 'rich, buttery steaks' at this 'helluva' Downtown chain chophouse; you probably already know it's pricey and has a 'stupid name,' but 'red-meat cravers' say it's 'worth every dime' for 'top-notch service' and 'attention to detail'—so long as you charge it to your 'expense account.'"

Murray's is the old guard Minneapolis steak house; it's been around since 1946. It's the "Home of the Silver Butter Knife Steak," which is so tender one can cut it with a table knife. Ooo.

Bruce actually went to Murray's once a few years ago on the government's nickel as a guest of his CIA handler (who would plotz if he saw this in print). He recalls it was one of those textbook power restaurants, and that all the waiters are older than his father. And it was good, for steak.

Last year, *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* reviewed to a finer grain, comparing specific dishes at the four restaurants. According to them, the best New York strip and porterhouse is at Morton's, and the best rib eye is at Manny's. Manny's also serves the best hash browns and tomato-onion salad. Ruth's Chris didn't win in any category, but consistently scored high marks in all categories.

We also have the newcomer **Capital Grille** and **J.D. Hoyt's**. The salad course at J.D. Hoyt's is an assortment of crudité, which is a nice twist we've not seen elsewhere. But how much faux wood paneling can one city take?

As far as cheaper dead cows (i.e., hamburgers) go, we have some suggestions. The 2001 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers' poll recommends (in order) Lion's Tap Family Restaurant, Convention Grill, Matt's Bar, Champps, and Fud-druckers. Champps is the only one that's downtown; and it serves what is probably the best spicy chicken breast sandwich in the city. You can get an adequate burger at the Hilton's Harmony's restaurant, though, and not have to go outside.

On the other hand, if you drive to one of the several Outback Steakhouses in the area for either a steak or a burger, we don't want to know about it. In fact, we're not even going to publish their phone number.

Manny's Steakhouse

Hyatt Regency Minneapolis
1300 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis
S 13 St & Nicollet Mall
612-339-9900

Steak House

Zagat's: F-27, D-23, S-26, C-\$43
RR, TO, PP, IWL, D, SA

Murray's

26 S 6 St, Minneapolis
Hennepin Ave & S 6 St
612-339-0909

Steak House

Zagat's: F-25, D-22, S-25, C-\$34
RR, TO, PP, IWL, L, D, LM, AT, Da,
SF, R

Morton's of Chicago

Gaviidae Common, Minneapolis
Nicollet Mall & S 6 St
612-673-9700

Steak House

Zagat's: F-25, D-23, S-24, C-\$43
RE, PP, VP, FB, IWL, L, D, GG

Ruth's Chris Steak House

920 2 Ave S, Minneapolis
S 10 St & 2 Ave S
612-672-9000

Steak House

Zagat's: F-26, D-22, S-24, C-\$41
RR, PP, FB, IWL, D, SA

Capital Grille

801 Hennepin Ave., Minneapolis
Hennepin Ave & S. 8th St.
612-692-9000

Steak House

Zagat's: F-22, D-24, S-22, C-\$37
RE, FB, IWL, D, SF

J.D. Hoyt's

301 Washington Ave. N., Minneapolis
Washington Ave N & 3rd Ave.
612-338-1560

Steak House

Zagat's: F:23, D-15, S-20, C-\$25
RE, VP, FB, OS, L, D, LL

du Jour's Casual Cafe

If you want breakfast, and you don't want to eat in the hotel, this is your closest option. Luckily, it's also a good option.

Go out the front door of the Hilton. Look across the street, at the second floor of the building in front of you. There you'll see a sign for the du Jour Cafe, with an arrow pointing to the right. Cross the street, go to the right, and then turn the corner. Du Jour's will be on your left about halfway down the block.

Du Jour's is immediately comfortable. The décor is muted; there's a wood fire in the fireplace (at least during colder months). The tables are further apart than you'd expect, and the restaurant is quieter than any breakfast restaurant deserves to be.

And there's a nice attention to detail. The water pitcher has a slice of lemon in it, and the server leaves the pitcher at your table. She also leaves a pitcher of coffee. And no sanitized individual packets of this and that; there's a real sugar bowl and creamer, and pot of jam on the table. The orange juice is freshly squeezed, and is available either by the glass or by the carafe.

They serve the breakfast basics, and a bunch of other nice options. There are three different varieties of eggs Benedict on the menu, several varieties of omelet, and a bunch of different types of pancakes. They serve a variety of skillet breakfasts, all with basted eggs (see "How to Order Eggs," page 84).

Bruce generally orders the *huevos rancheros*, which is not what you're used to. It's more of a Mexican salad with eggs on top: lettuce, tomato, black beans, chilies, onions, and cheese on a tortilla with chili verde sauce and a pair of basted eggs. Karen believes that lettuce and egg should never appear on the same plate, and refuses to have anything to do with this. Bruce likes it, especially after adding a dollop of hot sauce.

Another oddity on the menu is the "plum nutty" sticky buns. This is an English muffin, toasted, with cinnamon, brown sugar, and almonds, served with cream cheese and cinnamon apples. Bruce thinks they are way too sweet, but Karen likes them.

This is a breakfast restaurant. They serve lunch—burgers, salads, chicken sandwiches, soup, "melts" (no tuna, though)—but at 2:30 they close up and go home. Nice work if you can get it.

du Jour's Casual Cafe
89 S. 10th St, Minneapolis
S. 10th St & Marquette Ave.
612-333-1855

Breakfast
Zagat's: F-21, D-15, S-18, C-\$12
B,L

El Mesón

We like this place. It's reasonably priced, efficient, friendly, and delicious. Maybe that's why it can be so hard to get a table.

The menu has a variety of Spanish and Hispanic dishes. The pork and spicy scallops comes in a Creole sauce and rice, and is typical of the Dominican Republic. The *zarzuela de mariscos* (seafood casserole) is a specialty, and typically Catalanian. We also like the chicken in garlic sauce (served with a generous amount of paprika), and the marinated chicken breast topped with shrimp and a sour cream sauce (*pollo y camarones*).

Bruce's favorite entrée is *carne frita con mofongo*: grilled pork sautéed with onions, wine and vinegar, served with mashed plantains and a tangy sauce. It's a Puerto Rican specialty, and just delicious. We've also had the *paella*—a two-person dish of lobster, shrimp, clams, mussels, squid, pork, chicken, and sausage, served over saffron rice mixed with some vegetables—as good as any we've had in Spain. The *paella* takes at least 45 minutes to cook, so plan on spending a long time waiting. We once tried ordering it on the phone before we got there; they'll do it if you give them a credit card to charge the meal against if you no-show.

The appetizers are good, too. The last time we were there we got the sampler plate, and got to taste the fried squid, meat pies, chicken croquettes, and crab croquettes. Everything was tasty, and the sampler plate came with a creamy, pinkish sauce that Karen adores, and a flavorful, nicely hot *pico de gallo* that was as good as any we've had. They also serve a variety of soups and salads. We like the garlic soup especially well.

Some things about the restaurant are odd, though. They serve 3.2 beer, but not wine. Even a mediocre sangria would be nice to have with dinner. Some entrées come with salads and some do not, but there's nothing on the menu to indicate this one way or the other.

Service is efficient and friendly, and the kitchen is happy to take special modifications to the various dishes. It can be crowded on weekends, though. Several times we've gone without reservations only to be turned away at the door. Call ahead.

El Mesón

3450 Lyndale Ave S, Minneapolis
W 34th St & Lyndale Ave S
612-822-8062

Spanish, Latin American

Zagat's: F-20, D-13, S-17, C-\$16
TO, L, D, SF

Embers

“Morning, Noon or Night Time! Any Time's The Right Time! Remember the Embers! Breakfast, Lunch or Dinner! Any Meal's a Winner! Remember the Embers!”

So went the advertisements in the 1970s.

The Embers, a 24-hour family restaurant (“family” here means “no liquor license and cheap food brought by a waitress”) and Minnesota institution, is the closest restaurant of its type to the IETF hotel. You want eggs at some odd hour? They've got 'em. You belong to All-Night Hackerdom, and want to crawl out predawn for actual food before crashing? Embers will be open.

Karen has a special relationship with this place. She used to work there. She's worked at most of the Embers around town, almost all of which now seem to have disappeared. So it was kind of an adventure to go back, visit the old haunt, and see if the Embers is everything it used to be. It is, and it isn't.

The biggest change is that Embers has decided to franchise their name. Well, franchise it again really; they had two franchises back in the 70s but quickly squelched them as renegades. A still-standing former Embers is across Hwy. 100 from Nicklow's up in Crystal. The chain is now called "Embers America," and has some concept wherein they link the Embers name with locally owned family restaurants. Hmmmm.

We couldn't tell just what part of the whole operation the franchisees had control over. This Embers never was a locally owned family restaurant; it was always an Embers. We don't know about, and we couldn't find any evidence of, the unique spin the restaurant ought to have—at least as we understood the Embers America concept. It looked like, well, an Embers, to us.

In the mid-80s, the Embers on 26th and Hennepin was an infamous hangout. The late-night scene was a legend. Everybody, simply everybody went there: drag queens, college students, runaways, the bar crowd, people heading to work, people heading home. It was noisy, it was rowdy, it was fun. Halloween was a pageant, and people staked out tables starting at 8 PM so they'd have good view of the dining room. And it seemed like most nights were Halloween.

On our visit, there was nothing about the Embers to suggest this wild and lively scene had ever existed. Now granted, we weren't there at 2 AM, but at about 9:30 PM. Perhaps things heated up later on.

But some things were just as they always had been. The floors were just as dirty as ever. The walls were just as dingy. This isn't a company that spends a lot of money on janitors. For some reason the non-smoking section was off to the side, clear across the building from the main dining room, and that made us feel like we'd been relegated to the back forty. When Karen worked there, the table we sat at was an employee break table, and was only used for customers on Sunday mornings. At least we could see into the service area, which looked largely unchanged.

The menu listed many of the same items Karen served back when. A few of the good ones were gone. The ribs used to be surprisingly good when made correctly, though they almost never were. The smallest size hamburger is no longer available. Neither is the steak sandwich, which was never any good, but which once earned Karen a \$100 tip.

Embers claims to have invented the bacon cheeseburger, which we think is funny, considering that both the founders are Jewish. They called it the Emberger Royal, and for decades it was the centerpiece of the menu. This burger was served brushed with a light BBQ sauce ("Emmy sauce"), and came on a toasted bun with a slab of grilled onion, and a few pickle slices on the side. It was actually a pretty good hamburger.

So, of course, that's what Karen ordered. The five-ounce burger is bigger than she wanted, but is the smallest size available. It came with Emmy sauce that tasted about as she expected it to. But there was no grilled onion, and no pickle slices. The bun, not toasted, was a soft, gummy processed flour thing

that didn't hold up. The meat tasted fine, but the ensemble wasn't what it used to be.

She ordered the combo, which meant it came with French fries and a salad. The combo salad was bigger than what was served back in Karen's day, but came with the same kind of dry-looking iceberg lettuce and several red onion rings and a piece of cucumber—no tomato. The blue cheese dressing, an Embers house recipe, was exactly as good as it should have been, and is the best Karen has ever had. The fries were weirdly chewy and sort of gummy, much like Burger King fries.

The coffee was the same thin and weak (by today's standards) brew that Karen still prefers over the tar-flavored sludge pumped out of Starbucks and their ilk. The standard finish to an Embers meal is the strawberry pie—a little dish of pie crust filled with fresh strawberries and topped with a sticky red glaze, and the whole covered with whipped topping (unless the bus boys have sucked all the nitrous oxide out of the aerosol cans again).

When we ordered the strawberry pie, which was on the menu priced as “market price,” our waiter told us that it was unavailable. Karen recalls from her Embers days that strawberry pie was virtually always available, and at the menu price. If they are now listing it at market price, then they should have it available. Isn't the whole point of a market?

Something new on the dessert menu is the “World's Smallest Hot Fudge Sundae.” Served in a two-ounce disposable soufflé cup, it was about three bites of hot fudge and ice cream, neither of which tasted quite as good as Karen remembered. At 35 cents, we suppose they sell a lot of these, and think it's a generally good idea. They also offer a tiny cheesecake for the same price, but we didn't get a look at that. (For the record, Kinkaid's also has a “world's smallest hot fudge sundae.” It costs \$2.95. We did not compare size.)

Our waiter was very nice. He was chatty but efficient, and he never lost track of us, his one table in the non-smoking ghetto. Seems Embers can still attract at least a few competent servers. The food was well-prepared and came quickly, though the ingredients and presentations weren't up to their former standards either. So the cooks at Embers can, it appears, still cook.

We don't understand the new management concept, but we sure don't think it's improving the Embers any.

Embers

2600 Hennepin Ave S, Minneapolis
W 26th St & Hennepin Ave S
612-377-6920

American

NR, TO, FP, B, L, D, LL, LLL, 24

Figlio

When the Calhoun Square Mall was built (we don't suppose anyone calls it “Udale” anymore), **Figlio** was the perfect restaurant for the space. It anchored the corner of Lake and Hennepin, it had lots of attitude (the name is

pronounced “FEE-lee-oh”), it had good food. It appealed to the urban hip crowd that populates Uptown, and it was open late.

All these things are still true. And, since we are not your typical Uptown denizen, we were surprised that we liked it. We first gave it a try on one of those busy days when 10 PM rolled around and we realized we’d forgotten to eat dinner. We easily got a table at 10:30, and we decided to split the tapenada appetizer.

It was fabulous. You get a scoop of sun-dried tomato stuff, a scoop of black olive stuff, and a scoop of white cheese and garlic stuff, all served with a pile of warm pita triangles. They’ll bring you more warm pita if you want, and you probably will. You’ll also have gotten a basket of bread, and there’s olive oil to dip it in, but spread the appetizer on the bread, too. And it’s too much for two people; get a takeout box.

The menu is sort of California Italian, which works better than you’d expect. They’ve got interesting pizzas and bake them in their special wood-fired pizza oven. The open kitchen means you can watch the cooks make your pizza, sort of. We figure this design (common to all local restaurants with wood-fired pizza ovens) was dreamed up by someone who stood at the window staring into the Shakey’s Pizza kitchen just like we did when we were kids. The pastas are good, and come in ample portions, as do the salads. There are also sandwiches and assorted entrées (garlic chicken breasts, roasted salmon, marinated grilled beef... that sort of thing). The desserts are good, too.

We go to Figlio regularly. We take guests; we go alone. We’ve rarely been disappointed.

They’ve got a full bar, which draws a loud late-night crowd. In fact the noise level is Figlio’s chief drawback. The tables are close together and usually full, the music is aggressively loud, and there’s plenty of hard surfaces to bounce the sound around.

The service, another unplus, is adequate. The servers are not as efficient and prompt as we like, nor as accommodating. They’re not rude or inept, they’re just not as good as we’d expect.

The kitchen closes late, which makes Figlio our favorite late-night restaurant (the readers of *Mpls.St.Paul* agree). It’s easy, reliable, and there’s a parking ramp (they don’t call them “lots” here) nearby.

Figlio’s
Calhoun Square, 3001 Hennepin
Ave S, Minneapolis
W Lake St & Hennepin Ave S
612-822-1688

Italian
Zagat’s: F-21, D-19, S-19, C-\$18
TO, VP, PP, FB, SB, L.D.LL, LLL,
OS

Gay Hangouts

This is something neither Karen or I has researched extensively, so when our friend Larry Sanderson volunteered to write up this section, we happily took

him up on it. The first batch of places is gay bars and clubs, and the last few are gay-friendly restaurants and coffeehouses.

Boom is across the river from downtown, close to Ground Zero. The cream of the S&M (stand and model) crowd are regularly in attendance, at least the ones that can't dance. Gay video bar with a restaurant.

Oddfellows is the restaurant behind the bar. You have to go through the bar to get to it. Dark marble bistro tables in a square room with a bar. It has more pretensions to food than any other gay restaurant in Minneapolis. The food is good, but the menu is limited. Pizza, pasta, steak, chicken and a couple of sandwiches, and a dessert or two. Salads from a bag. Best house wine in a gay restaurant that I found—Rosemount. Hours are 5:00 PM to 10:00 PM (11:00 on Friday and Saturday). Closed Mondays.

The **Gay 90's** is, according to Sidewalk, the megamall of Twin Cities gay clubs. Drag shows upstairs caught a lot of attention (and a lot of tourists, if you know what I mean), and they are still popular. Male dancers in the main bar Friday and Saturday nights, disco, 70s disco, pool room, pull tabs, leather bar (through the disco men's room on the main floor), and cruise bar. Restaurant in the evening (5:30–9:30). The hard-core drinkers hang out in the Happy Hour (the only part of the bar that used to be gay). Their drinks used to be incredible, cheap, and solid booze. They used to put tomato juice in Bloody Marys the same way your grandmother put in Tabasco.

The 90's runs two restaurants. The main bar is open for dinner from 5:00 PM to 9:30 (10:30 on Sunday). It's very affordable. Nothing on the menu would scare your grandmother except for the people at the next tables. I had a special, Creole spaghetti with shrimp. The sauce was neither super hot nor for the timid, I liked it. The spaghetti was very Minnesotan (overcooked). The shrimp were plentiful and, like the drinks at the 90's, not small, and they'd pulled the tails off. Menu is burgers to steak. Forget the house wine and order a cocktail or beer.

On Friday and Saturday nights, they open a Garden Court restaurant from 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM, which is the closest thing to a 1950s time machine you can get. You must have reservations (Web or phone), or there's little chance you'll get in. It's a low rent version of a Trader Vic's, with a South Seas bar and mural, and one menu item, all-you-can-eat prime rib. Caesar salad (probably bag romaine, but it was fresh and crisp with or without anchovies (I asked for 'em but didn't get 'em). Rolls that only your grandmother would love, a huge chunk of meat guaranteed to raise your cholesterol levels above or equal to your alcohol level, an ice cream scoop of instant potatoes, au jus, and a ramekin of horseradish. The prime rib is boneless but the baked crust is left on with the thick fat nicely seasoned.

Mostly men and groups of men, of a certain age, drank shaken table poured martinis. Everybody seemed to know everybody else, but they didn't mind giving me a table and letting me watch because I got there when they opened. A rather large drag queen played at the grand piano with a huge construction of a heart for Valentine's Day behind her (she really wasn't wearing it). Rainbow bunting and a scraggly collection of plants outlined the windows overlooking 4th street; if I'd clicked my heels together, I might have been in 1953, but certainly not in Kansas.

Minneapolis Eagle is the current leather bar in the Twin Cities. Dress code on Friday and Saturday nights (means wear boots, and some kinda leather, rubber, or uniform—no tennie runners, and I've gotten booted out in my huaraches a few times; and if you gotta ask what a dress code is, don't go after 9 PM on a Friday or Saturday). Bar food. Busy on the weekends, but bingo, movies, and specials most of the rest of the week. Beer bust on Sundays can get a crowd before the Tank opens up at the Saloon. Patio in the summer, and a BBQ on Sundays during the beer bust. Open late on the weekends, but no booze after 1 AM. They serve breakfast and sandwiches until 3 AM on Friday and Saturday night.

Y'All Come Back Saloon is the standard dance bar for the S&M crowd (stand and model—if you got that wrong, I'll see you at the Eagle). Patio in the summer, bar food. Pool tables. Video bar, back bar turns into a leather bar on Sunday and Wednesday nights. Tends to be busy late. Probably the best sound system in the cities.

Bar food after 5:00 PM. Free lunch on Sundays, 3:00 to around 5:00, but for some reason, I still think Heinlein got it right.

With regard to **Ruby's Cafe**, any place that will sell me a smoked trout omelet with chevre and leeks is quite all right by my book. It was wonderful. They had two other special omelets, avocado, garlic and Jarlsberger; or prosciutto, mushrooms and shallots, and I would have eaten either one. Ruby's is open from 8 AM to 3 PM and then again from 10 PM to 3 AM. Menu is mostly breakfast fare, sandwiches, a burrito or salad, but it is interesting. Space is small, so don't try and show up with 30 of your favorite friends. If it's winter, sit in the loft (cold on the main floor). The cafe overlooks Loring Park in the heart of the Minneapolis gay ghetto.

Bryant-Lake Bowl is, well, kinda, sorta. It's almost Uptown and almost gay. I'll drink beer in a bowling alley, but only when I gotta go to the theatre and only then if it's Miss Richfield. There's something about the sound of bowling that does not lend itself to food. The beer is good, and the small experimental theatre is one of the best in the city as long as you are not claustrophobic.

Vera's Cafe is a gay coffee house that is doing well. Patio in the summer. Light food for when the line's too long at the Egg & I, or they're closed. Just off the Greenway.

Cafe Barbette used to be a busy spot to hang out and get some coffee, cruise some boys, blade or bike the lake (Calhoun), then closed and turned into a new place by the same owners. It has since reopened; give it a try.

Boom

401 E Hennepin Ave
Minneapolis
612-378-3188

Gay Bar/Restaurant

Gay 90's

408 Hennepin Ave
Minneapolis
612-333-7755

Gay Bar/Club

Minneapolis Eagle

515 Washington Ave S
 Minneapolis
 612-338-4214

Leather Bar**Y’All Come Back Saloon**

830 Hennepin Avenue
 Minneapolis
 612-332-0835

Gay Bar**Ruby’s Cafe**

1614 Harmon Place
 Minneapolis
 612-338-2089

American, Breakfast**Bryant-Lake Bowl**

810 W Lake Street
 Minneapolis
 612-825-8949

American**Vera’s Cafe**

2901 Lyndale Ave S
 Minneapolis
 612-822-3871

Coffeehouse**Cafe Barbette**

1600 West Lake Street
 Minneapolis
 612-827-5710

Coffeehouse**German**

Minneapolis doesn’t have much of a German population, and it shows. While there are German restaurants, they’re designed for Americans.

The **Black Forest Inn** is South Minneapolis’s German restaurant. It’s a noisy place, with high ceilings and German-looking crests on the top of the walls. We were there during the Christmas season, and the large deer head on the wall sported a red foam nose.

The menu is textbook German country cooking: *wiener schnitzel*, *sauerbraten*, goulash, *hasenpfeffer*, *rouladen*, *paprika schnitzel*, all served with piles of filler: red cabbage, sauerkraut, dumplings, spaetzle, etc. There are extra sides if you need even more food: chopped liver, potato pancakes, herring.

The food, unfortunately, is mediocre. Nothing terrible, but just not very good. The *jager schnitzel* was tough and chewy and the mushroom sauce was dull. The dumplings were hard and tasteless. The goulash was uninspiring. The red cabbage was delicious, but that’s not terribly hard. The *spaetzle* was marvelous: light and buttery. They have a small selection of German wines, and an acceptable list of beers on tap (including Urquel pilsner). And a selection of German-like desserts: tortes and strudels.

Service, on the other hand, was first-rate. Although it was crowded, we were seated quickly, our orders were taken quickly, the food arrived quickly, and everyone was competent, efficient, and friendly. Our water glasses were always full, and we didn't have to wait for anything. The waitstaff knows what they're doing here. And while we weren't impressed, others obviously are. *Minnesota Monthly* and *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers voted this the best German restaurant in the Twin Cities.

Gastof Zur Gemutlichkeit is an extraordinary place. *Gourmet* magazine readers (in 1999) voted it "tops for fun," whatever that means. *Minnesota Monthly* and *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers consider it the second or third best German restaurant, which is less of an honor when you realize that you can't even think of a fourth German restaurant.

Karen visited it just once, several years ago, but the details have remained with her to this day. It is the only restaurant she's ever been to, indeed the only one she's ever heard of, that features an employee who roves the dining room offering snuff to the patrons. (She didn't try it.)

They're got a troupe of accordion players who circulate the dining room, too, keeping up the rowdy, kinda sloshed ambiance along with the noise level. Though some of you may be running screaming from the thought of accordion players serenading your dinner, it's not all Beer Barrel Polka. One of the more amazing sights of Karen's visit was the table of 20 or so, all more than tipsy, pounding out the drum solo to "Wipe Out" while the accordion player sat out and smiled.

And tipsy isn't the half. Most people order their beers in a boot-shaped glass that looks to hold a quart or more. At random intervals the waitstaff all yell over the din: "Ein! Zwei! Drei! Vier! Ticky Ticky Ticky Ticky!!" This is the signal for everybody to chug their entire huge glass of beer and order another one. A couple of rounds of that, and a lot of people can't walk so well any more.

Happily for light drinkers, partaking in all this gemutlichkeit is entirely optional, and adds to the amusing sideshow that comes free with your dinner.

As for food... um, yeah... they have food. Karen ordered the sauerbraten when she was there and recalls liking it. The food isn't really the point, though.

Black Forest Inn

1 E 26 St, Minneapolis
Nicollet Ave & E 26 St
612-872-0812

German

Zagat's: F-20, D-21, S-17, C-\$17
NR, TO, FP, FB, L, D, LL, LLL, OS,
BA

Gasthof Zur Gemuetlichkeit

2300 University Ave NE,
Minneapolis
23rd Ave NE & University Ave NE
612-781-3860

German

Zagat's: F-18, D-22, S-21, C-\$18
RR, TO, FP, FB, SB, D, LMDA

Giorgio

There are three, actually: Giorgio, Giorgio's on Lake, and Locanda di Giorgio. We've been to the second, but the first is closest to the hotel. Our experience first.

Giorgio's on Lake is a traditional Italian trattoria: lots of windows, murals on the walls and ceilings, a red tile floor, and an informal menu of appetizers and salads, focaccia pizzas, pastas, and random Northern Italian entrées. The place is noisy, even with a few people, and we hesitate to try holding a conversation when the restaurant is full.

Unfortunately, the food was uniformly mediocre. Almost everything we ordered was just not right; something was wrong with it. The *arrabbitia*—penne pasta tossed with chicken, onions, mushrooms, cream, chili flakes, and tomato sauce—was flat and boring. The portobello mushroom ravioli with wild mushrooms, garlic, sage and butter was likewise disappointing. The pesto focaccia with sun-dried tomatoes and walnut pesto, roasted garlic and Asiago cheese was the worst of the lot; it actually tasted bad. The only thing to recommend was our appetizer: bruschetta al Provolone: toasted bread with garlic and olive oil, and topped with tomatoes and smoked Provolone cheese.

Service was excellent. Our waiter was helpful and friendly, the kitchen was efficient, and there's free parking in their lot. In the summer there's outdoor seating, and once we stopped there for salads while bike riding. Last summer Karen had a nice dinner, also in the sidewalk café, so perhaps the kitchen is slipping. At this point we are not sure we'd go back there for dinner.

Our experience does not bode well for **Giorgio**. But since both Zagat's and Citysearch rate the food better, we may be overreacting, or have been there on an off night. Citysearch's praise isn't uniform, though: "Perfection is not everyone's ideal. If it were, you wouldn't have places like Giorgio, where the food is rustic, the service can be haphazard, the couple at the next table is practically in your face—and you leave feeling blissfully satisfied." Zagat's also complains that the tables are too small, the place too crowded, and that the service is inconsistent. Not really our idea of fun; we like to talk during dinner and we don't like to be abused by the staff. Still, Zagat's claims that the food is delicious Tuscan cooking and Citysearch says similarly gushing things about the food. Dara Moskowitz, whom we rely on to be brutally honest, says: "The only restaurant that earns consistent raves from both flavor-maven foodies and atmosphere-seeking, value-conscious hipsters, the original Giorgio's is the worst-kept gourmet secret in town." Okay, so we'll try it again.

Giorgio

2451 Hennepin Ave, Minneapolis
W 25th St & Hennepin Ave S
612-374-5131

Italian

Zagat's: F-23, D-18, S-19, C-\$23
NR, TO, FP, BW, L, D

Giorgio's on Lake

1601 W Lake St, Minneapolis
Irving Ave S & W Lake St
612-822-7071

Italian

Zagat's: F-21, D-19, S-18, C-\$20
RR, TO, FP, FB, L, D, OS

Goodfellow's

On the world's food stage, Minneapolis isn't even a player. There's no high end on the scale of Paris, London, New York, or even San Francisco. This is no real surprise; the Twin Cities don't have the same local population or the torrents of wealthy tourists or expense-account business travelers. A metro-area population of a couple million people just isn't enough, and Mall-of-America tourists are a different demographic.

What we have is **Goodfellow's**. Not that this is bad, mind you. We like Goodfellow's. We like the food, we like the experience. It's expensive, but not outrageous. A few years ago Goodfellow's was undisputedly the best restaurant in the Twin Cities. This has changed somewhat; in the 2000 *Mpls.St. Paul Magazine* and the 1999 *Gourmet* surveys of Minneapolis restaurants it was listed second. And we think it will fall even further as restaurants like Aquavit get a larger following. But it's still just as good.

Two years ago, Goodfellow's moved from its location in the Conservatory building (since demolished to make way for a new interstellar bypass) to a beautiful art deco room at City Center. The room, built in the 1920s as the Forum Cafeteria, has since been a bar/disco called Scottie's, a restaurant called the Paramount, and then Mick's Cafe. The first owners stayed in business long enough to steward the décor through that awkward period between when art deco was fashionable and when it was defiantly retro, and no one has touched it since. The space itself is worth the visit.

And so is the food. Goodfellow's specializes in American food: local ingredients, fish and game, lighter preparations. On our last visit, we ordered a delicious clam chowder with venison and potato dumplings; the chowder was more flavorful than most, and complemented the dumplings nicely. Karen's wild rice and romano risotto was light and tasty, but a bit rich for an entire course. Bruce won the appetizer round with an Asian-style peanut-fried Ahi tuna.

For main courses Karen ordered the veal chop with sweet corn pudding and barbecued onions. It was good, but a little too much like a hunk of meat for our tastes. Bruce's pork tenderloin in a mango purée with shrimp and wild rice pot stickers was very good; the mango purée is just the sort of thing that Goodfellow's does best. But our dinner guest won the round with her lamb loin slices with potatoes and a huckleberry sauce.

Desserts are pretty good, too. They do nice things with chocolate.

Goodfellow's boasts the best wine list in town, and as at their previous location, has a huge number of bottles of display at the restaurant entry. It's all American (and mostly Californian), in a wide range of prices. If you feel intimidated by the list, and it's hard not to be, ask your waiter's advice. They're reasonably knowledgeable, and while they probably won't make the perfect selection, they'll make a pretty good one.

None of this comes cheap. Goodfellow's is about as expensive a meal as you can get in Minneapolis unless you leave the decimal point off your personal check when you pay. Entrées are \$23 to \$32. Expect a full meal—appetizer, entrées, dessert, tax, tip—to cost \$70. Wine is extra, and priced for the special

occasion, although there is a good selection of wines in the \$40 range. No bargains, though.

The service isn't nearly as cloying as one expects in top restaurants in cities without a legitimate high end. But we were disillusioned when the waiter did not know one of the ingredients listed on the menu. We were unimpressed that we had to snatch an extra fork, and then an extra knife, from the next table over because we wanted them and could not catch the eye of any server. (We are the sort of people who will order four desserts and sixteen forks so everybody can taste everything.) And we found it a bit annoying to have to tell the waiter twice that we'd like a few more minutes to look the menu over, thank you. The service in top restaurants is seamless and nearly invisible; this wasn't. But they mean well, and mostly don't hurt anything.

If we had to complain a bit more, it would be about the poor hyphenation on the menus. This being a "fancy" restaurant, your food comes with extra adjectives and requires an atlas to understand. "Wisconsin veal chop," "Iowa lamb," "Carolina quail," "Minnesota buffalo"...you get the idea. But "Seared Alaskan Day Boat Halibut" could really use a hyphen, as could "Crispy Angel Hair Potatoes." And we know that "Oven Warmed Chocolate-Roasted Nut Purse" isn't what it says it is; how about a hyphen between "oven" and "warmed," and a comma or a semicolon between "Chocolate" and "Roasted." The waiter didn't understand why we cared.

Come for the grammar; stay for the food.

Goodfellow's

City Center, Minneapolis
Nicollet Mall & S 7 St
612-332-4800

American

Zagat's: F-28, D-26, S-27, C-\$43
RE, PP, VP, FB, IWL, L, D, GG, SA,
R

Greek

There's a lot of Greek food in the Twin Cities: most of it in St. Paul and some in Minneapolis. Oddly enough, most of it is very good. Since IETF is in downtown Minneapolis, we're going to limit our reviews to Minneapolis's Greek restaurants (St. Paul Greek restaurants should not feel slighted in the slightest.) **Gardens of Salonica** is easily the best Greek restaurant in the city. Physically, it's nothing to talk about. It's a narrow room inside a small storefront on an obscure side street just north of downtown. The tables are cramped (deal with it, otherwise there'd still be a line from the previous night), and there's a lot of bumping and jostling.

Everything is delicious. Start by getting some of the appetizers for the table. *Octapodi*—marinated octopus in vinegar, wine, olive oil, black pepper, and herbs. *Tarama*—Greek caviar mousse with lemon and olive oil. *Anginarse*—artichoke hearts in lemon, garlic, and olive oil. Fava beans puréed with lemon, garlic, olive oil and spices. (Noticing a pattern in the ingredients?) *Skordilla*—garlic potatoes with lemon and olive oil. You can order a sampler plate of several for the table.

The entrées are wonderful. The stuffed cabbage (*lachanodolmades*) is some of the best we've ever had; the stuffed grape leaves (*ambelodolmades*) are just as good. They have excellent moussaka and delicious lamb dishes. And there are a few vegetarian entrées for those who don't want meat.

The service is very friendly. Once, we went there with Bruce's parents, who are difficult diners (this is putting it kindly). Our waitress dealt with their questions, their special requests, and their sending back of food because of the ominous sauce that wasn't explicitly listed on the menu. She even brought a small dish of soup for Bruce's father to try, having given up trying to explain its taste and consistency.

Christos is much more a "real" restaurant. You know—décor, waiters and waitresses, tablecloths. The food is good. Not as good as Greektown in Chicago, but good nonetheless. They have all the traditional American Greek favorites—saganaki (that flaming *kasseri* cheese appetizer that everyone orders just to see the waiter's eyebrows fry a bit), moussaka, *spanakopita*, gyros, souvlaki—and some surprises. The owner is from Cyprus, which means that you can also find some Cypriot specials here and there.

The appetizers are a great place to start; get some for the table. And since you can get most entrées in appetizer-sized portions, there's no reason not to get small plates of everything. All the entrées are served with *avgolemono* (a traditional egg-lemon soup that's just fabulous) and a salad. And there are a number of combination plates—some vegetarian—if you can't make up your mind.

Kypros is closer to the hotel, and serves better food. Portions are generous, so bring friends and share. Probably the best deal is one of their taverna dinners (they serve it for two and for four, but order the n-person dinner for n+1 people): a chef-chosen feast of ten or more plates. Their pitas are wonderful, and they have lots of tasty spreads to put on them. Their salads are huge, and laden with feta. They also have all the standard dishes you'd expect at a Greek restaurant, all better than average.

The restaurant is clean and pretty. There are two rooms, one with a bar and kitchen, and a dining room with mock Greek-like décor and blue-checked tablecloths on the tables. Service is pleasant.

It's Greek to Me is the oldest Greek restaurant in Minneapolis, and the only mediocre one of the lot. Just don't bother; you can do so much better. To be fair, though, others don't agree with us. The restaurant was voted second best Greek in the 2001 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers' poll. We think the votes were because of the restaurant's outdoor patio, one of the prettiest in town... not that that does you any good in March.

Aladdin Cafe is a small, family-owned downtown Minneapolis restaurant that offers gyros, lamb and chicken kebabs, and spinach pie. Garlic-chicken gyros are a specialty. We've never been.

Gardens of Salonica

19 5th St NE, Minneapolis
E Hennepin Ave & 5th St NE
612-378-0611

Greek

Zagat's: F-24, D-16, S-17, C-\$14
RL, TO, FP, BW, L, D, NCC, GD

Christos

2632 Nicollet Ave, Minneapolis
 W 26th St & Nicollet Ave
 612-871-2111

Greek

Zagat's: F-22, D-18, S-21, C-\$17
 RR, TO, GE, FP, BW, L, D, R

Kypros Greek Restaurant

1420 Nicollet Ave, Minneapolis
 W 15 St & Nicollet Ave
 612-870-4414

Greek

Zagat's: F-20, D-18, S-20, C-\$23
 RR, TO, GE, BW, L, D, LL, OS

It's Greek to Me

626 W Lake St, Minneapolis
 Lyndale Ave S & W Lake St
 612-825-9922

Greek

Zagat's: F-22, D-19, S-17, C-\$16
 RL, TO, BW, L, D

Aladdin Café

704 Hennepin Ave, Minneapolis
 N 7th St & Hennepin Ave
 612-338-6810

Greek, Mediterranean

TO, DL, PP, L, D, LL, LLL,

Harmony's—In the Hilton

Getting to Harmony's was difficult. Our normal procedure for reviewing a new restaurant was to find friends to go with us. There are so many interesting independent restaurants nearby that we never found any enthusiasm for the hotel coffee shop, even though it's quite an upscale coffee shop. Even Citysearch's reviewer didn't eat there, clearly writing from the menu alone: "Harmony's is a casual hotel restaurant offering American fare, including pasta, burgers, sandwiches, and fish. Specialties include deep-dish Minnesota chicken potpie with a homemade puff-pastry crust; meatloaf and mashed potatoes; and Mobley Salad crammed with ham, turkey, egg, and avocado. Homemade desserts include chocolate-mousse cake and Key lime pie."

So we had the hotel fax copies of the menus for us. Bruce has eaten in more hotel restaurants in more cities than he cares to admit, and he thought the menu looked like every other one he's seen. It's expensive. It serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It has a variety of things for different people: sandwiches, soups, large and small salads, entrées, desserts. The entrées sound interesting but probably aren't. None of that increased our enthusiasm for trying Harmony's.

Little did we know it, but we knew a couple of Harmony's experts who have regularly eaten there over the years. So we dragged them along to dinner.

Jeff's first recommendation was the meatloaf, which he would regularly have from 1992 when the place opened until he stopped eating meat. Jeff's second recommendation was the linguini with shrimp and pesto cream, which had been recently deleted from the menu. Jeff also recommended the veggie burger and the barbecued chicken sandwich.

We ordered the meatloaf. It was good, but nothing special. The vegetable stir-fry was less impressive, long on hated water chestnuts, short on broccoli. The capellini pasta with clams, herbs, and tomato *concassee* was likewise nothing

special. The Caesar salad was a Caesar salad; the steak was a steak. Probably the best thing we had was the artichoke spinach dip appetizer, but we've had much better across town at the Loring.

Service was good. Our waiter was friendly and gave good advice about the food. There was a hairdressers' convention in town when we went, and Harmony's was *very* busy. We had to wait fifteen minutes, in the bar, for our table. Service can be slow if it is crowded, but it's close.

Harmony's serves lunch, too. The menu is basically the same (there are fewer entrées and more sandwiches), only cheaper. Breakfast is like breakfast at every hotel restaurant in the country; it's serviceable.

Harmony's

Hilton, 1001 Marquette Ave,
Minneapolis
S 10th St & Marquette Ave
612-376-1000

American

Zagat's: F-21, D-19, S-19, C-\$18
TO, PP, FB, B, L, D, SA

Indian

There's not a lot of Indian food in the Twin Cities, and we don't tend to seek it out (too busy slurping up *pho*, probably). But there are several decent options.

Jewel of India serves a respectable, if uninspiring, meal. The food is what you'd expect from an Indian restaurant, and they have a lunch and a dinner buffet. The buffets have a lot of vegetarian dishes—this is to be expected and we thought the veggie dishes were better than the chicken—and mostly standards. The day we were there they had *aloo gobi* (potatoes and cauliflower), *bainjan bhata* (an eggplant dish), and several others. There was also tandoori chicken (served at every Indian buffet in the United States), saffron rice, and *nan*. We wished the buffet food were hotter, but that's a minor nit.

They serve three kinds of Indian beer, which is something you don't find most places. It's handicapped accessible, except for the bathrooms, which are downstairs. Overall, this is a nice enough place for a mid-budget Indian meal.

Taste of India is out in St. Louis Park, but serves a much better Indian meal. We like it because it's flavorful and not just hot.

Many years ago, before most Minnesotans knew about spicy food, we had the Sri Lanka Curry House. It was an anomaly, an anachronism, an apparition. It was regularly voted the hottest food in the Twin Cities. People far and wide knew of it. In 1990, *Money* magazine named it one of the 90 best restaurants in the country.

A few years ago it closed, but now it's back. Renamed the **Sri Lanka Restaurant**, it's under the same ownership. The restaurant is smaller and cleaner, and the menu is more focused on seafood. Lobster, squid, mussels: all tasty. A good selection of vegetarian dishes, and some meat dishes. These dishes are meant for sharing; ordering n-minus-one entrées is about right. Probably the best Indian food in the area.

Jewel of India

1427 Washington Ave S, Minneapolis
 Cedar Ave & Washington Ave S
 612-339-0002

Indian

Zagat's: F-21, D-16, S-18, C-\$14
 TO, GE, PP, FB, AB, L, D, OS, BA

Taste of India

5617 Wayzata Blvd, St Louis Park
 Park Place Blvd & I-394
 763-541-4865

Indian

Zagat's: F-23, D-14, S-18, C-\$16
 RR, TO, FP, BW, SB, L, D, SF

Sri Lanka Restaurant

3226 W Lake St., Minneapolis
 612-926-0110

Indian**Japanese**

More than anything else, ingredients are what make great Japanese food. The cooking style is so minimal, so spare, that the quality of the food comes right through. Sushi is a prime example. We've eaten it in a lot of different restaurants, in this country and in Japan. At the better sushi restaurants in Japan the fish is so fresh it's amazing; the taste can't compare with what you can get in Minneapolis, even with air shipments and better refrigeration technology. Broiled eel, tempura, soba: it all really tastes better over there.

There is good Japanese food in the United States, mostly in areas that have a large Japanese population or a steady stream of Japanese business travelers: New York, San Francisco (actually, all over Silicon Valley), even Schaumburg, IL. It might not be as good as back home, but at least it's authentic. Minneapolis, unfortunately, doesn't have very good Japanese food.

What we can say about **Ichiban**, Minneapolis's own *teppanyaki* restaurant? You sit in a semicircle around a big grill, and if your party isn't big enough to take all the seats, you'll be seated with random strangers. This can be fun, and you can go home with bizarre tales about the weirdos sharing your dinner table. A chef-actor juggles knives, chops shrimp, dances among salt and pepper shakers, and cooks your food while making stale jokes. They generally do a pretty good job of cooking for a dozen people at a time, most of whom have ordered something different, and that can be fun to watch. We're told that in Japan these places are called "American steak houses"; this is foreign food all over the world.

It's theater as much as dinner, and we thought it amusing the once we ate there, and even enjoyed ourselves. Nowadays, if we go at all, we skip the circus and duck into the back-room sushi bar. There you'll find an island with two sushi chefs inside, surrounded by a small moat surrounded by comfortable chairs. Plates of sushi float by on little boats (don't mock; we've seen this kind of thing in Japan as well) and you pay based on the pile of plates in front of you when you're done. The sushi is fresh but not great (okay, sometimes the fish is the merest bit frozen still), not the best tasting, and the selection isn't very interesting. But Sundays, Mondays, and Wednesdays they have an all-you-can-eat special (a sign on the wall warns that you have to eat the rice, too—no eating just the fish on top) that makes the trip worthwhile for many.

Origami is Minneapolis's hip and trendy Japanese restaurant. It's expensive, the waitstaff is young and beautiful, and the food is acceptable. Unfortunately, it's the best you can do in Minneapolis (*Minnesota Monthly* readers vote it the best in the area, as did the readers of *Mpls.St.Paul*).

Origami's menu is neither broad nor interesting. It has some of the standard dishes you'd expect: sushi, sashimi, *gyoza*, tempura, hot-pot dishes. Others are surprisingly absent: no *soba* or *udon*, no *unagi*, no *tendon*, no *yakisoba*, no *shabu-shabu*, not even *tokansu*. They have a series of Japanese-esque dishes—American food with Japanese accents: scallops with shiitake mushrooms and sake, filet mignon with Hibachi sauce. And they have “New York style cheese cake” for dessert alongside their green tea ice cream. We've never had a bad meal there, but we've also not been really wowed.

Better is their sushi bar. The fish is fresh, the selection reasonable, and the chefs seem to know what they're doing. It's expensive, though: \$4.00 or more per pair. And they're often out of the most interesting stuff (which, we suppose, is better than serving substandard quality).

Most disappointing is their sake selection. They have a few, but nothing very interesting. They seem to sell a lot of wine, which says something about their clientele.

Leaving the food aside, it's a pretty restaurant. The tables are crowded and it can get noisy, but everything is clean and crisp. We've always had good service, whether sitting at a table or back at the sushi bar. They recently expanded upstairs, so those who haven't been there in a while can look forward to more available seating. Depending on the winds of trend, Origami can get pretty crowded. They don't take reservations, but there is a bar area to wait in. And every place setting has a little piece of origami.

We prefer **Café della Vita Sushi Bar**. For those who follow Minneapolis sushi politics, the star sushi chef is named Tengu Thao. He made a name for himself at Origami, and moved briefly to Fuji-ya in an attempt to turn that restaurant into something worth dining at. Last year he left Fuji-ya for this new restaurant, taking his chief sideman with him.

The restaurant is hard to find—it's upstairs and around the corner and down the hall—but worth it. Pretty and delicious sushi and sashimi, and the madcap rolls that Tengu is famous for. Look for things like the Crunchy Roll, the Whopper Roll, the Unique Roll, the I don'tknow Roll, the I don'tknow Roll 2, and the I don'tknow Roll 3. The ingredients seem to change regularly, depending on what's fresh.

Also downtown is **Sushi Sawatdee**. This place serves decent sushi, but it's a bit too trendy for our tastes, and most of what we remember of your visit was how overpriced everything was. It gets good reviews, so don't stay away on our account.

Fuji-Ya has gone through many transformations; its reviews go out of date faster than any other Minneapolis restaurant we can think of. The current owner is Carol Weston, whose grandmother made the earlier, downtown incarnation of Fuji-Ya a local legend. When her grandmother died, Carol closed the downtown restaurant for a decade. She reopened in South Minneapolis. It was bad for a while, then Tengu worked at the sushi bar and it was better, and

then Tengo left and it was bad again. (We have memories of absolutely horrible service).

Recently she closed, moved, and reopened, and reports are that it is good again. We haven't been there yet since the reopening. Dara Moskowitz: "On my recent visits, I found food at Fuji Ya to be better than I remembered it. I was particularly dazzled by an order of grilled yellowtail cheek (*hamachi kama*, \$7.25). Here the tender curve of fish between gill and body is salted and grilled until it boasts a hatchwork of black grill marks. Each bite distills the essence of *hamachi*, the white California tuna, without one unnecessary addition. A bowl of *udon* noodles with vegetable tempura (\$6.95 at lunch, \$11.50 at dinner, vegan at special request) delivered fat, tender noodles in a delicious broth next to a mound of lacy, greaseless tempura made with a nice assortment of vegetables, including sugary, nutty slices of acorn squash. A plate of mixed *oshinko* (\$4.75) was a generous assortment of sweet, dry cucumber pickles, squash, tangy burdock, and absolutely beautiful ink-black mushroom pickles."

If you're hankering to drive to St. Paul, visit **Sakura**. The fish is at least as fresh as Origami, and the restaurant is one of our old favorites. When we ordered some real *wasabe* from a grower in Oregon, this is where we took it to eat.

Ichiban Japanese Steak House

1333 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis
Grant St & Nicollet Ave
612-339-0540

Japanese
Zagat's: F-20, D-21, S-20, C-\$25
RR, TO, PP, FB, D, SS

Origami

30 N 1st St, Minneapolis
1st Ave N & N 1st St
612-333-8430

Japanese
Zagat's: F-26, D-21, S-21, C-\$26
NR, TO, FB, L, D, GD

Café della Vita Sushi Bar

615 Second Ave S., Minneapolis
612-612-752-9537

Japanese

Sushi Sawatdee

122 N Fourth St., Minneapolis
612-375-9811

Japanese

Fuji-Ya

600 Lake St W, Minneapolis
Lake St & Garfield Ave
612-871-4055

Japanese
Zagat's: F-20, D-22, S-19, C-\$22
RR, TO, FP, BW, L, D

Sakura

338 St Peter St, St. Paul
W 4th St & St Peter St
651-224-0185

Japanese
Zagat's: F-25, D-19, S-20, C-\$25
RL, TO, GE, PP, FB, L, D

Joey D's

Chicago is famous for a lot of regular foods: Chicago pizza, hot dogs. Less famous, but also regional, is Italian beef. It's basically brisket boiled in a sauce, usually served in a hero sandwich with various toppings. Italian beef joints are not as common as hot dog stands, but still plentiful.

Bruce regularly ate Italian beef sandwiches while living in Chicago. Italian beef with sweet peppers and red sauce, to be precise. At their worst they're much better than fast food; at their best they're... well... even better than that.

We know of one place in Minneapolis that serves Italian beef with sweet peppers and red sauce, just like Chicago used to make: Joey D's.

Joey D's is a real Chicago place. They serve Chicago hot dogs. They serve Italian beef. There are posters for the Bulls and the Bears and the Cubs on the walls. You order at a counter and wait for your number to be called. And then you dig in. They serve pizza, but it's thin crust and not Chicago deep dish.

Honestly, we're not able to objectively review the place. We're not objective about Italian beef. It's comfort food, like meatloaf or *coctel de pulpo*. If you're from Chicago, you'll understand.

Joey D's Chicago Style Eatery

3101 E 42nd St, Minneapolis
612-729-5507

American

Keys Cafe

We've tried to get to the **Keys** on Nicollet Ave, honest. While this particular restaurant has eluded us, we have eaten breakfast at several of their other locations over the years. Keys was voted "best breakfast" in the 2001 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers' poll and we agree. Keys is what a family restaurant should be: good, cheap, fast. The reviews quoted below pretty much capture the Keys experience.

Mpls.St.Paul Magazine says: "Keys is about real food, the labor of love of Hunn and her family: including four of her children, two sons-in-law, two ex-sons-in-law, a daughter-in-law and five grandchildren. Meals here are the hash-slinging comfort type, the kind you'd make for yourself if you could ignore nutritional guidelines and practical portion size. Pancakes are so big they flop over the side of the plate, omelets and hashbrowns need to be mopped up with the toast, and the cinnamon rolls (if you're early enough to get one before they're gone) are the size of your head—and did we mention that they melt in your mouth? Depending on the location (closing times vary), turkey dinners, chili, meatloaf and burgers round out typical lunch and dinner fare. Family knickknacks decorate the walls, service is cheerfully gruff and the surrounding patrons will no doubt invade your personal space. But at Keys, it just adds to the homespun charm."

Zagat's says: "You want breakfast like grandma fed you? go for it,' and 'if the breakfast doesn't keep you going all day, the wry comments from the servers will'; 'the menus wear their grease stains with pride' at this chain of 'down-home' 'joints' that are specialists in 'mammoth portions' of 'real people food,' including the 'best caramel rolls' around."

We say: go.

Keys Restaurant

1007 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis
S 10th St & Nicollet Mall
612-339-6399

American

Zagat's: F-20, D-12, S-18, C-\$10
TO, PP, BW, B, L, D, KF

Kieran's Irish Pub

We've never been to Ireland, but friends who have insist that the pubs there are just like Kieran's. It's crowded. It's noisy. There's music. The walls are covered with Irish things. The long dark bar is covered with Irish things. The menu is covered with Irish things.

And it's good stuff. The Irish lamb stew is delicious. As the menu says: "A liter of Guinness and a bottle of wine in every batch." Also carrots, onions, and potatoes. And slices of soda bread to sop up the extra gravy. The corned beef and cabbage is tasty and authentic. It too comes with potatoes. The potato leek soup comes with gravy. So do all the fish entrées. And the various meat pies.

It is possible to avoid potatoes and the Irish specials. There are soups, salads, sandwiches, meats, and fish. We see no reason to order anything but the Irish stew, so you're largely on your own here. In the interests of research, though, we polled a few nearby tables the last time we were there. No one had any complaints about the food or the drink. (Okay, maybe we'll try the fish and chips the next time we're there.) They even serve Strongbow cider (in cans), which is Bruce's favorite.

There are two dining rooms. There's the bar area, and there's the "Titanic Lounge" in the back (or in the front, depending on which entrance you used). They both serve the same food, but the Lounge is more like a restaurant (including the requisite non-smoking section). This is an excellent choice for lunch.

There's live music at Kieran's most nights. Generally they are local acts, but they manage to book some national names as well. Two weeks before the IETF, Tommy Makem played in the Titanic Lounge. Tickets were \$25, and you all should be sorry you missed it.

Kieran's Irish Pub

330 2nd Ave S, Minneapolis
2nd Ave S & 4th St
612-339-4499

Irish

Zagat's: F-16, D-20, S-18, C-\$15
RL, FP, FB, TO, L, D, LL, LLL, GG,
PW, OS, LM

Korean

Korea House has a telephone, but don't bother calling because no one answering knows enough English to carry on a conversation. It's not very clean, has no décor to speak of, and service that you'd expect from a family-run restaurant. In short, it's just what you'd expect if you wandering through a random Seoul neighborhood and stopped at a random restaurant for a meal. The food matches in authenticity: not great, but serviceable.

We generally order the *bibimbop*, which is a bowl full of stuff rather like the bun dishes you get from Vietnamese places, but with an egg. They have Korean maki sushi, and everything we've tried there is good.

The bathroom is downstairs, inaccessible for mobility-impaired folks. That's too bad. Everyone should have equal opportunity to see the bathtub.

That seems to be it for Minneapolis. If you want to go to St. Paul, there's Mirror of Korea and Shilla Stone BBQ. Zagat's gives both a no-atmosphere-but-authentic-and-cheap-and-good rating. We've never been to either.

Mai's Korea House

414½ Cedar Ave., Minneapolis
Cedar Ave S & Riverside Drive
612-339-9385

Korean
NR, NCC, L, D, SF

La Bodega Tapas Bar

When Bruce lived in Chicago, one of our favorite haunts was Emilio's Tapas Bar. There were two of them, one downtown and the other in the Western suburbs. Whenever we went, we always ended our meal with *datiles con bacon*: dates wrapped in bacon. They were almost like dessert; the bacon was sweet and perfectly matched with a red pepper sauce. It was our deft ability to deal with five pieces for the two of us that gave us the confidence we needed to move in together and get married.

La Bodega Tapas Bar is not nearly as good, and there are no bacon-wrapped dates, but if you want tapas in Minneapolis it's where you end up.

Tapas are Spanish appetizers, small plates of this and that meant for sharing. (There's actually an optimal number of people to eat tapas with. Too few and you don't get to try enough menu items. Too many and the portions aren't big enough to go around. We think four or five is optimal, depending on how good people are at making 72-degree angles.)

There are about 50 different tapas dishes, including tons of vegetarian options. They range wildly in quality. On the plus side are the albondigas (meatballs), tomato-tuna-egg salad, langostinos a la plancha (grilled prawns), calamari, garlic shrimp, mixed grilled vegetables, and mussels. On the minus side are the Spanish omelet with potatoes, caprese, red-wine-stewed squid, squid stuffed with raisins, smelt, and pork tenderloin. Anything else, you're on your own.

La Bodega is a pretty place. It's a storefront, with bright yellow walls and a high ceiling. In the summer there are outside tables, perfect for watching South Minneapolis stroll by. The flamenco music is a bit annoying, but most of the time the din of conversation drowns it out. It's friendly, and has become a neighborhood meeting spot.

The food is pricey, and it's easy to forget how much everything costs in the rush to try this and that. But despite all the negatives, we think La Bodega is a valuable addition to the South Minneapolis restaurant scene.

La Bodega Tapas Bar

3005 Lyndale Ave S, Minneapolis
Lyndale Ave & Lake St
612-823-2661

Spanish

RL, FB, L, D, LL, LLL, OS PW, T

Lincoln Del

Bruce's parents were in town, so it seemed natural to take them to the **Lincoln Del**. In their capacity as professional New York Jews, we wanted them to pass judgment on Minneapolis's attempt at a deli.

Their verdict wasn't good.

The menu looks fairly Jewish, with corned beef, knishes, tongue sandwiches, potato pancakes, chicken liver, smoked whitefish, and matzo ball soup. A bit mixed up, but nothing you'd be ashamed to serve at a *bris*. But then there were the oddities: "Gruyere cheese and pear layered on a turkey-pastrami-pepper bread"? "Broiled hamburger, pepper cheese, bacon, lettuce, and tomato served open face on a bagel"? My rabbi would plotz.

Bruce's mother pronounced the matzo ball soup as dense and grainy. "But it will fill you up," she said positively. Bruce agreed; not as good as mother used to make. (And not just because she watched him take notes.)

The chopped chicken liver was okay, but not very flavorful. Bruce's mother said that they should add more fried onion, and some pepper. (Actually, it did taste better with a lot of pepper, and some salt.) And the waitress had never even heard of schmaltz.

The beef brisket was boring and tasteless, and the accompanying broccoli was overdone. (Actually, that's pretty authentic, and how it tasted when Bruce was growing up. Karen's been back to New York for a few family events, and can confirm the story.) The salmon was wrong in every possible way, starting from "dry" and going downhill from there. Bruce's mother would have cooked it hotter and faster, and would have probably started with better quality salmon.

The only tasty thing we had were the latkes (potato pancakes). They were unanimously liked, although Bruce's mother would have made them differently. And Karen annually makes better at home around Hanukkah.

At least the portions were large.

Service was slow, made worse by the fact that we were tucked away in a corner where the entire waitstaff was able to completely forget about us for inordi-

nately long amounts of time. We started with a “trainee” waitress, but the restaurant switched us to someone more seasoned (from Jersey, no kidding) when it became clear that we had professional New York Jews with us, and not the amateur ones they’re used to serving.

And no, Bruce’s mother did not get offered a job as kitchen advisor.

Lincoln Del

4401 W 80th St, Bloomington
France Ave S & W 80th St
831-0780

Jewish

Zagat’s: F-18, D-11, S-15, C-\$14
TO, FP, FB, B, L, D, LL, LM, KF

The Local

The Local is a fine place to eat, although it is often crowded. The menu is simple; one review called it “everyday food done well” and we agree. The lamb stew is made with Guinness and tasted wonderful. The large plate of mussels tasted like you were eating them in Belgium. The bread was thick and warm and European. The saffron-sweet corn soup was delicious. There are sandwiches—roast beef, corned beef, chicken club, ham—a daily pot pie, steak, and roast chicken. We had a grilled cheese sandwich, which was served on toasted sourdough with Irish cheeses, bacon, and tomato chutney: a delicious twist on a old standby. The table across from us ordered the deep-fried squid, and pronounced it soft and tasty. And the fish and chips is reported (we haven’t made a study) to be the best in the Twin Cities.

The service was sketchy, and it seemed all the tables in the pub the late afternoon we were there were in one waiter’s section. He didn’t keep up with the rush very well, but we weren’t in any hurry and so had a leisurely time of it. He got some help from his co-workers when the hot food started coming up, so we assume we came to eat at an awkward time in the day.

Those of you with romance on your minds will be interested to hear about the Kissing Room, which is a booth that will hold as many as six people (make up your own rules), and which has a curtain to close you off from the outside world. (The only other local restaurant we know of with curtained-off booths is Fireside Pizza in Richfield, which as been there for years but we’ve not tried it.)

Local

931 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis
S 10th St & Nicollet Mall
612-904-1000

Irish, American

Zagat’s: F-21, D-24, S-19, C-\$29
VP, PP, FB, IWL, SB, L, D, LL, LM,
GA, GG, OS, T, PW

The Loring Cafe

About a year ago, an informal group of hackers and other computer-telco-techie lowlifes would meet on Thursday nights at the **Loring Cafe** for dinner.

It wasn't every Thursday night; people are out of town much too often to make it something regular. And it wasn't always on Thursday night; even when people are in town, they have complicated schedules. But it was always at the Loring Cafe.

If the Addams Family ran a bar/restaurant, this would be it. The décor is post-modern Gothic-funk apocalyptic. (It's been pronounced "just like Seattle!") The complex runs through about half a dozen rooms, with lots of nooks and crannies to hide private conversations. On the bar side are couches and low tables, chairs and end tables, overstuffed chairs and no tables. There are a couple of balconies, a smattering of fake (at least we hope) crumbling architecture, large expanses of fabrics on the walls, a fountain, and a stage. The restaurant side is more normal: quiet, subdued, pretty. There's even two outdoor sections during the summer: in front of the bar area, and in back of the restaurant area. Outdoors in back is probably the most romantic dining spot in the Twin Cities (at least when it's not sub-zero outside); a narrow space between tall brick walls with a splash of neon atop one of them.

The food is uniformly competent, and generally tasty. The artichoke ramekin is their signature dish: an appetizer of artichoke hearts smothered in parmesan cheese, peppers, and garlic, and served with toasted French bread. One is plenty for the table, unless you really like artichokes. Their steamed mussels are another good appetizer—not as good as is served in Belgium—but really good for land-locked Minnesota. Bruce's favorite appetizer is their roasted *crimini* mushrooms and polenta, served with corn, spices, and gorgonzola cheese. And their pizzas are nice, too.

For main courses, there's a salmon served with curried vegetables and tomato-coriander sauce. The salmon is only okay, but the accompaniments have a nice bite and are very good. The duck breast, served on onion-yam purée, garnished with gorgonzola cheese and walnuts, served with a port wine reduction, is just stunning. The lamb stew, a special the last time Bruce was there, was the weakest of the entrées; it was so blended that none of the flavors stood up to the black pepper.

There is a small, uninspiring dessert selection: competent, but nothing more.

The Loring has a full bar, with a reasonable selection of beers and wines, a not very good cider (and the occasional really putrid pear cider special), and a smattering of scotches.

The food is the same in the bar and the restaurant, so you can choose your décor without worrying about the menu. The bar is generally crowded and noisy; the café is much quieter. And the waitstaff has to be seen to be believed. Think starving artist types, although they're not starving. And they have attitude, which alone can be worth the visit. The more reserved servers work in the restaurant.

Loring Cafe

1624 Harmon Place, Minneapolis
Maple St & Harmon Place
612-332-1617

American Eclectic

Zagat's: F-22D-25, S-17, C-\$28
RR, VP, FB, SB, L, D, LL, LLL, LM, R

Lucia's Restaurant and Wine Bar

The 2000 *Gourmet* restaurant survey only listed two Minneapolis restaurants (I presume because readership in the Twin Cities was down). Aquavit took the “Best Fine Dining” award, and Lucia’s the “Best Seasonal Cooking” award. The magazine said: “If Chez Panisse moved to the Twin Cities, it might feel like this unpretentious storefront filled with flowers, fruit, and earnest waiters. The menu changes weekly, the owner (Lucia, of course) is committed to using locally grown and organic ingredients, and the food is honest, American, down-to-earth, and delicious.”

We agree. We definitely agree.

We like this place. The menu is short and interesting, and changes weekly. Everything is fresh and well-prepared. (The “roasted chicken breast with apple-caraway-Reisling demi and red cabbage” we had on our last visit was surprisingly good.) The waitstaff is efficient and helpful. The wine list is interesting and reasonably priced (but not extensive). Lucia’s is one of our favorite places to just go and have an unpretentious good meal.

In 1998, *Gourmet* said: “The menu changes weekly, but you can count on good soups (a shrimp and halibut chowder with sweet peppers, fiddlehead ferns, and the lightest touch of whiskey was especially impressive), great salads, and dishes like pork chops with sweet corn relish. You might choose a beet risotto with grilled chicken on greens, but no matter what, don’t skip dessert.”

We’re not sure we agree with the dessert part: one time we ordered a chocolate brownie made with beets. Sometimes “natural” can be taken too far.

Lucia's Restaurant and Wine Bar

1432 W 31 St, Minneapolis
W 31 St & Hennepin Ave
612-825-1572

American

Zagat's: F-26, D-22, S-24, C-\$27
RE, VP, BW, L, D, LL, R, GD, SF, PW,
T

Mexican

It’s not news that Central and South America encompass a much larger area than just Mexico, but for some reason most North Americans can’t see much difference in these cuisines, and it’s all called Mexican food. We both like this kind of food. We’ve eaten it in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, Cuba, Chicago, and New York. (Bruce has also eaten Mexican food in Japan, but he doesn’t want to talk about it.)

A few years ago, it was impossible to find good Mexican food in Minneapolis. Tex-Mex, sure, but not authentic Mexican or Central American food. Today there are dozens of small, family-run, authentic Mexican restaurants: zero ambiance, good food, cheap prices. The clientele is mostly Hispanic, as is everyone who works there. (Karen generally orders in Spanish, because it’s just easier, but you can order in English, too.) We’ve heard that it’s immigrants

from Chicago, coming to Minnesota because the social safety net is better. Some of them open restaurants, so we all win.

These are our favorites.

Restaurante Puerto Escondido is probably second. This restaurant is in a building that used to be a Hickory Hut, and the décor—down to the chuck-wagon-shaped menu—remains. They have all the basics you'd expect, and some surprising gems. The *pollo al carbon* is delicious. Any of the fajita platters are delicious. Reviews recommend the whole red snapper—*huachinango a la veracruzana*—but we can't imagine fresh fish in a restaurant that basically never has any customers. But the enchiladas are the best in the Twin Cities. It's not all perfect, though. Avoid the *carne asada* and the pan-fried octopus (pity, really). And the guacamole is boring and too salty.

Bruce likes **Tacos Blass** (technically, it's called "Tacqueria Don Blas," but there's a big "Tacos Blass" sign on the front awning that gives this place its name) a lot better than Karen. It's a dive: cheap tables and chairs, not much light, TV blaring in the corner (English or Spanish, depending on who had control of the remote last). To a first approximation, the food is free: tacos, tostadas, quesadillas, and sopes are \$1.50 or less. Tortas and burritos are about \$3.50. This is real food, not fast food (although it's fast). The steak tacos are minimalist—just flavored meat and cilantro—but delicious. The sopes are more complicated, with lettuce, tomato, sour cream, and that yummy crumbly white Mexican cheese that Bruce unfortunately calls "Chihuahua cheese." The larger, more complicated burrito dishes are good, too, but stick with the small basics. And there's an all-you-can-eat lunch buffet that we recommend you avoid.

Me Gusta is as upscale as this new set of restaurants gets. They've moved to this new spot (having previously been connected to their Latin grocery store several blocks west on Lake St.) and have put some time into décor. It's a bright, spiffed-up, mostly clean place. They serve the gamut of Mexican dishes, but our personal spotlight is on squid salad. Called *coctel de pulpo* on the menu, it's a slightly sweet tomato sauce base with big pieces of octopus. It's exactly like we ate in Argentina. We go there just to order it, having a vast fondness for food with puckers.

Taco Morelos is pretty divey, but serves good Mexican food. They're open for breakfast, so if you need a fix of huevos rancheros or huevos con chorizo, this is the place to go. Beware the burritos, though. They're too big and nothing like what you'd find in a more traditional restaurant.

Little Tijuana is not Mexican, it's Tex-Mex. (You're expected to know the difference.) A perennial Minn-stf hangout (it's been around since 1961), its chief charm is that it is open until 2:30 AM. The food is nothing special. The dinners come with very un-Mexican salads, and more food than you can reasonably expect to eat. And if you don't want anything even remotely Hispanic, column 3 on the menu offers burgers and chicken sandwiches. The food comes very quickly (we were given our vast mounds of hot food before we had a minute to eat our salads) and the service is friendly.

The folks at Mad Mad Mexican served better Tex-Mex than Little T's, in Karen's opinion. Unfortunately, their long-time location is now a huge YWCA built by Amazon.com. (Amazon was a local women's bookstore long before the dot-com revolution, and the resulting settlement resulted in many women-

friendly institutions receiving an enormous financial boost. Thanks, Jeff Bezos.)

Unfortunately, none of these places is downtown. The one downtown option is a place we've never been to: **La Cucaracha**. It gets mixed reviews, like this one from Citysearch: "La Cuc's menu, which is the same at all locations, doesn't explain its fabulously loyal following. Enchiladas Suizas (tortillas and chicken smothered in Swiss cheese and a pedestrian salsa *verde*) and the house soup (chunks of chicken and lots of cilantro) are competent but forgettable, although Tacho's Pollo Loco, a chicken breast covered in a chipotle-flavored adobo sauce, is a longtime favorite. The much-touted chips are greasy (but the guac is great) and the iced tea is that lousy dispenser stuff. But no one seems to mind. The long weekend waiting list provides time for a quick run to City Center in Minneapolis."

Restaurante Puerto Escondido

320 E Lake St., Minneapolis
612-822-4395

Mexican
NR, FP, TO, L, D, SF

**Tacqueria Don Blas (Tacos
Blas)**

3764 Nicollet Ave S, Minneapolis
W 38th St & Nicollet Ave S
612-825-5410

Mexican
NR, TO, L, D, NCC, SF

Me Gusta

1507 E Lake St, Minneapolis
15th Ave S & E Lake St
612-724-6007

Mexican
RL, TO, FP, BW, B, L, D, SF

Taco Morelos

14 W 26th St., Minneapolis
Nicollet Ave & 26th St
612-870-0053

Mexican
Zagat's: F-22, D-8, S-16, C-\$10
NR, TO, FP, B, L, D, OS

Little Tijuana

17 E 26 St, Minneapolis
Nicollet Ave & E 26 St
612-872-0578

Tex-Mex
TO, L, D, LL, LLL, BA

La Cucaracha

533 Hennepin Ave, Minneapolis
612-339-1161

Tex-Mex
Zagat's: F-18, D-13, S-15, C-\$15
L, D SF

Middle Eastern

We love **Emily's Lebanese Deli**. The décor is hole-in-the-wall: the tables are bare, and there's massive pieces of refrigeration equipment along one wall (the aforementioned "deli" portion of the restaurant), noisy fans above, and a plate glass window out to the street on another wall. But so what? The service is fast and friendly, the food is cheap, and it's all delicious.

Bruce has been searching out good hummus for years, and he thinks Emily's makes the best in the Twin Cities. The tabbouleh and baba ghanouj are both

excellent; you can easily make a meal of those appetizers alone (served with fresh pita). Don't, though; the entrées are just as good. The kebabs are tasty, the grape leaves are wonderful, and the kibbe (both raw and cooked) are delicious. Actually, we recommend ordering a combination plate and tasting everything. For dessert, order the halvah. They make it themselves, and it's orders of magnitude better than any you've ever had.

The only downside to this restaurant is its popularity; it's always busy. Lunch time is its busiest, but people cycle through quickly.

Jerusalem's is closer to downtown. Not as good and a bit more expensive, but serviceable nonetheless. We've tried a number of dishes here. We like the kabob platters and the pea soup (flavored with curry, but not at all spicy). And the vegetarian kofta is excellent (as is the version with meat).

Jerusalem's décor is dark and exotic. There are tapestries on the walls, red cloth draped off the ceiling, assorted scimitars—that sort of thing. There's belly dancing on Friday and Saturday nights. This means two things: 1) the noise level is too high for good conversation, and 2) you can pretty much forget about getting a table on Friday or Saturday nights.

Our vegetarian correspondents tell us that **Java**, is also good for a vegetarian meal: "you can get foul(e) and falafel and fried vegetables, and they always have one vegetarian soup, which is just lovely (Awada's, we think it's called—it's the red lentil one and it has a ton of garlic in it, but is very mellow). Be warned, though, the restaurant's advertising mentions belly dancing as well." Karen reports never having a good meal there, despite several attempts.

Falafel King is a counter-style fast food Middle Eastern restaurant that is much better than it deserves to be. It deserves to be Midwest-style schlock; actually, it's more like Israeli fast food (well, presumably Arab fast food, but we've only seen it in Jerusalem). The menu is standard: falafel, gyros, kebabs, grape leaves. Quick, easy, cheap, and good.

We've always meant to try **Sinbad Café**. Dara Moskowitz raved about it last June, and we still haven't managed to get there. She faunches over the baba ghanouj, exudes over the tabouli, extols the grape leaves, and raves about the spinach pie. She also likes the lamb, beef, and eggplant stew and the potato, carrot, onion, tomato, and chickpea stew (served either vegetarian or with lamb or chicken). There are a lot of vegetarian dishes here.

Emily's Lebanese Deli

641 University Ave NE, Minneapolis
7th Ave NE & University Ave NE
612-379-4069

Jerusalem's

1518 Nicollet Ave, Minneapolis
W 15th St & Nicollet Ave
612-871-8883

Java

2801 Nicollet Ave S, Minneapolis
W 28th St & Nicollet Ave S
612-870-7871

Middle Eastern

Zagat's: F-22, D-10, S-16, C-\$10
RL, TO, FP, L, D, NCC, GD

Middle Eastern

Zagat's: F-20, D-16, S-17, C-\$13
RL, TO, FP, BW, L, D, LM, OS

Middle Eastern

RL, TO, FP, L, D, LM, NCC

Falafel King

701 W Lake St, Minneapolis
 Lyndale Ave S & W Lake St
 612-824-7887

Middle Eastern

Zagat's: F-18, D-9, S-13, C-\$9
 RL, TO, FP, BW, L, D, LL, OS, NCC

Sinbad Café and Market

2528 Nicollet Ave S, Minneapolis
 Nicollet Ave S & W 25th St.
 612-871-5605

Middle Eastern**Milda's Cafe**

Not far from downtown, just past the Farmer's Market and the impound lot, there's a little café in a nothing-much neighborhood. That café, Milda's, is the only place we know of around town with pasties on the menu. Not pastries, you understand, but big half-moon-shaped meat pies filled with ground meat and potatoes. These were brought to mining communities by the Cornish and Welsh miners, as they made a perfect "pocket meal" to carry deep underground. You can still get them in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, even though copper mining has long since played out. You can still get them "Up North" in Minnesota, even though mining up on the Iron Range has largely been replaced by sophisticated taconite recovery technology that needs almost no employees. You can even get them in parts of Australia; sometimes it's the only thing available for breakfast. But around here, you buy your pasties at Milda's.

A neighborhood group is trying to find a new home for Milda's, and we think they'll find someplace. No doubt they'll find a new home, but we think you should have the definitive experience. Milda's is a true coffee shop of a restaurant. Practically everybody in the place is a regular, and the waitresses know everybody's name. The Starbucks coffee revolution has never raised its head at Milda's. The menu has both grilled cheese and tuna fish sandwiches, and a whole lot of other things besides pasties. In fact, pasties are only served hot on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays (\$4.50 with coleslaw; it's another 35 cents for extra gravy) and are only available frozen for take-out on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

And it's pronounced "PAST-ee." It does not rhyme with "tasty."

Milda's Cafe

1720 Glenwood Ave, Minneapolis
 Glenwood Ave & Lodan Ave N
 612-377-9460

American

Zagat's: F-19, D-9, S-20, C-\$11
 NR, TO, PP, B, L

New French Café

Way back, before the Warehouse District buildings became filled with trendy restaurants and even trendier people, there was the **New French Café**.

We're not aware of any Old French Café; the place has always been just what it is. One of the regulars in the Bar the night we were there has been coming to the New French since it opened in 1977.

The space is a series of storefronts and rooms, connected with narrow hallways suggestive of hardboiled detective novels and seamed stockings. It's probably the transoms over the doors. When we dropped in the New French one late evening, we wondered when Humphrey Bogart would wander through.

There's the Bar, and the Café, which are different from each other, though they share a kitchen and there's some menu item overlap. There's no reservations in the Bar, but they're recommended for the Café.

We've eaten dinner here twice, and we honestly can't remember much about either meal. They weren't disappointing, but weren't memorable either. The first time we were there they had a special Bastille Day menu. The second time was the regular non-Bastille menu. Bruce ordered the cassoulet, which he remembers being the best thing at the table. Karen doesn't remember what she ordered either time. We realize that this isn't much in the way of a recommendation, but there you have it. The Bar's more of a scene, anyway.

The Bar's a place that attracts the urban and the fey; kids wearing harlequin glasses and thrift store brocades (topped off in the winter with nondescript stocking caps) gather in corners to discuss whatever matters. It's all pretense except that none of it is. It's the sort of place where everybody smokes, except the bar isn't smoky (so perhaps it's the sort of place where everybody smokes, but nobody smokes very much). The restaurant is a large open space, and looks a whole lot less formal than the food. The menu doesn't have many dishes, but everything we've had is competent. Some examples: "Bone-Roast Pork, Grilled Sweet Potatoes, and Local Apple Relish," "French Fried Young Chicken, Pomme Frites, and Caramelized Vegetable Jus," and "Sauteed Salmon, Braised Root Vegetables, Roast Potatoes, Horseradish Mayonnaise." Basic French country cooking, basically good. Desserts are also uniformly good.

In the 2001 readers' poll, *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers voted it the city's best French restaurant.

New French Café

128 N 4th St, Minneapolis
2nd Ave N & N 4th St
612-338-3790

French

Zagat's: F-24, D-19, S-20, C-\$31
RR, PP, VP, FB, IWL, B, SB, L, D, R,
PW

The Nicollet Island Inn

The two coolest things about the **Nicollet Island Inn** have nothing to do with the food. One, it's a charming country inn. And two, it's on an island.

Most people don't realize that Minneapolis has an island, but we do—right downtown. It's walking distance from the skyscrapers, in the Mississippi River. The island isn't very big: a handful of streets, De La Salle High School, a

small park, and the Nicollet Island Inn. During the warmer months we like to walk or bike there. The neighborhood has a real small-town but funky ambience. Until about the early 80s, someone kept a donkey in their yard.

Nicollet Island Inn is a country inn in the city. The heavy wooden doors, plush sitting areas, fireplaces, and leaded glass tell you: this is a very special place. The Inn part is upstairs: 24 rooms, small but well-appointed. They have four-poster beds, large dressers, that sort of thing. Many of them have beautiful views of the river.

The restaurant is downstairs, and it also has a beautiful view of the Mississippi. The hostesses try to give everyone a river view (the quieter section is towards the back of the restaurant: still with river views, just away from the rest of the diners).

The food lives up to the surroundings. It's country style—game, fish, hearty vegetables—served in big portions on big plates. Southern pot roast, tender and tasty, served with horseradish mashed potatoes and crunchy vegetables. The walleye (from up North) is crusted with roasted pecans and served on a bed of wild rice. There is catfish, grilled Minnesota duck, succulent lamb chops with a suprisingly tasty tomato mint marmalade, many things served with wild mushrooms (we both like the wild mushroom beignet), assorted steaks, and more fish. Dessert is decent, but not what you come here for.

The wine list is spare, but the waitstaff seems to know all about it, and the prices are reasonable. And they have a full bar with a selection of single malts.

The room can get a little noisy. Service is about the only thing to complain about here. It's uneven: fine when the restaurant is empty, slow when it is full. But everyone is nice about it, and we're willing to forgive a little for the experience.

Nicollet Island Inn also serves Sunday brunch. We've never been there, but the 2001 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers' poll voted it the second best brunch in the Twin Cities (Lake Elmo Inn was number one; it's nowhere near downtown).

Cost: about \$40 for dinner, \$15 for lunch.

Nicollet Island Inn

95 Merriam St, Minneapolis
Hennepin Ave Bridge & Merriam St
612-331-3035

American

Zagat's: F-23, D-25, S-22, C-\$28
RR, TO, FP, FB, B, SB, L, D, R, OS,
W, GG

The Oceanaire

We stumbled across this restaurant about a week before it opened, in the space formerly occupied by the Italian restaurant Pronto. We were wandering the back halls of the downtown Hyatt, a space filled with good restaurants, odd shopping, and twisty turny corridors, all different. Though still under construction, it looked to be a pretty room and the menu posted on the door centered on seafood. We resolved to go back.

We were right. It is a nice room, in that 90s marketing version of 30s Posh Design sort of way. They have a large liquor bar, a raw bar, and a vast expanse of table seating. An inoffensive, albeit a bit loud, 90s mix of big band music played on the speaker system. The **Oceanaire** Seafood Room is Minneapolis's premier seafood restaurant. Its owners spared little expense: flying fresh fish in daily from around the world, and building a 33-degree fish cleaning and holding room on premises.

Like the dining room, the kitchen seems to be working right, but then what are we to make of the coleslaw? The menu is entirely à la carte—order the tuna and that's what you get: tuna. You get a small relish tray and bread up front, but the entrées are not accompanied by salad, veggies, potatoes, or anything else.

The menu changes daily, and features whatever fish they can fly in fresh. There are traditional preparations—the daily catches either broiled or grilled, shrimp scampi, whole lobsters, crab cakes—and there are more exotic creations by the chef. Our advice is simple: stick to the fresh fish in simple preparations. On our first visit we ordered two of the exotics: grilled yellowfin tuna with red wine reduction and shiitake and portobello mushrooms; and pan-seared Chilean sea bass, served in a beet reduction with bacon-cooked spinach and horseradish butter. Both were good, but problematic. The tuna was cooked beautifully, although the sauce was too heavy for it. The bass was quite tasty, though a tiny bit heavy and too salty. And this doesn't even take into account the coleslaw.

Since then, we've stuck to the more basic preparations and have been uniformly pleased. At the top of the menu, look for the fish that have been checked off. This fish is flown in daily, and it shows. It's not even worth giving recommendations; on our most recent trip they had Icelandic arctic char, Florida "Lemon Fish," Hawaiian "Monchong," Icelandic salmon, Red Sea bream, Maine sea scallops, Maryland soft-shells, George's Bank haddock, live Maine lobster, yellowfin "ahi" tuna, Canadian bluefin tuna, Florida "red mind," Alaskan halibut, North Atlantic cod, Hawaiian "kajiki," American red snapper, Pacific great sole, ivory king salmon, Chilean seabass, Pacific swordfish, and Florida mahi-mahi. If they have it and you like it, order it.

The menu has three non-seafood options: grilled chicken, steak, and a pork chop. There's also a very pricey "surf and turf" for those who want options. And what is possibly the world's most expensive appetizer, the Grand Shellfish Platter: a \$69 three-tiered array of cold items, including oysters and lobster, that's easily enough for two or three people. We saw it across the room; it practically screamed "tourists."

The appetizers are about what you'd expect: clams casino, shrimp cocktails, oysters Rockefeller, etc. The New England clam chowder was good but unspectacular; it had an odd smoky flavor we couldn't identify. Better are the clams; Oceanaire has, by far, the best raw bar in the Twin Cities. The night we were there they had thirteen different oysters, including *kumomoto* (Bruce's favorite). But at \$3–\$4 each, they're not cheap. They also have salads, and we were offered our coleslaw as an appetizer.

We had it as a side. As we said above, the fish stands alone. If you want rice, potatoes, or vegetables, you need to order those separately. These are all sized to split among three or four people, so we have no idea what to do when you

eat alone. Most of the sides are normal, but we've never seen anything like the coleslaw we were presented.

There are basically two ways to make coleslaw. The first is mixed with vinegar and celery seed. The second is sweeter and mixed with mayonnaise. Near as we can tell, this coleslaw tried to be both at the same time. It was a great mound of Type 1 coleslaw, easily enough for four people. The sides of the mound were covered by big fat slices of ripe tomato. Over this was poured what appeared to be mayonnaise. Lots of mayonnaise. Lots and lots of mayonnaise. And this was topped with sweet pickle relish. Lots of sweet pickle relish. The effect was of a layer of Type 2 coleslaw dressing over the Type 1 coleslaw. We did our best to eat from the inside out.

The Oceanaire's wine list is impressive, with a nice array of wines at a variety of prices. We would like to see more whites and fewer reds available by the glass, but this changes regularly.

The service was good. The entire staff was efficient, friendly, and very professional. We never got the slightest impression that anyone there was doing us a great favor by serving us, an attitude we encounter too frequently in all kinds of restaurants.

The Oceanaire is an expensive restaurant. Dinner can easily cost \$50 a person by the time you add everything up. It's certainly the best seafood in Minneapolis. Stick to that premise, and even you coastal types won't be disappointed.

Oceanaire

Hyatt Regency Minneapolis
1300 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis
13th St & Nicollet Mall
612-333-2277

Seafood

Zagat's: no ratings
RR, VP, PP, FB, IO

Old Chicago

We know nothing about this place, which has five locations (including one downtown). We've never been there; no one has ever admitted to us that they've been there. But it has the best beer selection in the Twin Cities, so we thought we'd at least mention it.

Citysearch says: "If pizza and beer is a Chicagoan's idea of a well-balanced meal, then **Old Chicago** is a health-food restaurant. With 110 beers on an ever-changing list and deep-dish and stuffed pizzas that have intriguing toppings and tasty crust, Old Chicago is a decent (if not quite so rave-worthy) alternative to Green Mill. Apps are typical bar food, but a \$16 appetizer sampler will keep four or more friends happily occupied while puzzling out which 'za to order. The King of Hearts (artichoke hearts, garlic and artichoke dip), Chicago Seven (all the pizza standards) and Meat Me in Minneapolis (four meats) are all winners, and you can select whole-wheat or white crust (go with the whole-wheat). Pizzas always seem a little underdone here; if you prefer crisp crust to doughy, ask them to bake it longer than usual. Pastas, calzones and sandwiches are also available. The beer menu includes brews from the Czech Republic, Italy, and France, as well as such monthly specials as Big Butt

doppelbock; non-imbibers can delight in huge soft drinks with constant free refills. Big comfy booths are always the preferred seating. Warning: If you can't name all of TV's 'Friends,' you're probably too old to sit downstairs in the big room filled with pool tables, a table version of shuffleboard, blaring pop music, and video games."

Zagat's says: "Though there's 'nothing new' at this 'plain' chain pizzeria, some salute the 'better than average' pies and single out the 'standout appetizers'; the 'gazillion' varieties of 'tap beer' stir suds lovers, though teetotalers warn that 'a good beer selection does not a restaurant make.'"

Karen has suddenly recalled a repressed memory of a large dinner expedition to Old Chicago. She's not sure why she repressed it, except that it was terribly mundane.

The readers of *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* claim that Old Chicago has the best beer selection in the Twin Cities. Good luck to you if you go.

Old Chicago

508 1st Ave N, Minneapolis
N 5th St & 1st Ave N
612-338-8686

Pizza

Zagat's: F-16, D-15, S-16, C-\$13
RR, TO, PP, FB, L, D, LL, LLL, VG,
P

Palomino

It's a pretty room, we'll grant you that. But the **Palomino** menu devotes as much time to lovingly describing the special wood paneling, the fixtures and so on as it does the food. Unfortunately, food is why we go out to eat.

Palomino is a chain restaurant, with branches in places like Seattle. As such, you can't count on the creativity and dazzle of an on-site chef with flair and an eye for perfect ingredients. You get the chain-standard meals and presentations.

Not that this is bad. They serve good food of the pizza and pasta variety, and we've never had a complaint any time we've been there. It's Italian a la California, and quite a bit like the menu at Sidney's or Figlio (though Palomino is more upscale than either). The menu breaks down into sections like "Shared Plates" listing items like "Herb Encrusted Portofino Dip" which doesn't make sense, but is explained by: "artichoke hearts, sliced onions, crab, parmesan, cracked crusts." Ah. At \$9, you're not likely to get enough food for one, let alone sharing around.

Things look up as we move through the menu with the "Soups and Salads" section and the "Roma-Style Pizza" section, and on through "Plates of the House": crab cakes or paella which, at \$17-\$19 ought to be plenty to share, though we don't seem expected to. The menu also gives us options under "Pasta," "White Oak Fired Oven and Grill," and "Spit Roasting."

It's a buzzword-compliant menu: portobello this and gorgonzola the other, sun-dried tomatoes, and triple-cream Brie. Roasted red peppers, risotto, bruschetta, raspberry vinaigrette. Since we like all those things, we like the food there, but it's soulless, and hasn't enough punch to overwhelm the atti-

tude of the room. Though Figlio serves much the same food, the liveliness of their space is a better match for the fare. A bit more knowledgeable waitstaff would be nice. Everyone we've interacted with there is very courteous and helpful, but last time in our server was unable to suggest an appropriate beer to go with our meal, and did not know what the special was, let alone if it was available.

They're open late, which is nice if you've been out to a show downtown, but we prefer a quality of food and service to match the pretension of the room. Palomino is a bit uneven in that regard. Even so, they're a huge success hereabouts.

Palomino

825 Hennepin Ave, Minneapolis
9th St & Hennepin Ave
612-339-3800

Mediterranean

Zagat's: F-25, D-26, S-24, C-\$28
RE, TO, PP, FB, IWL, L, D, SA, PW

Pane Vino Dolce

Pane Vino Dolce is a plain restaurant with good food. Citysearch says: "At Pane Vino Dolce, the menu offers much more than "bread, wine sweets." The small plate-sized pizza—a perfect appetizer for four—is a racy mixture of roasted garlic cloves, lots of capers and goat cheese atop a tomato-sauced crust. A tasty golden beet salad is accented with sharp Gorgonzola crumbles, dressed with a barely there Dijon mustard vinaigrette. Homemade silky ravioli gets spiked with fragrant rosemary. Risotto with mussels, salmon, scallops is nicely spicy, smoothed out in white wine. Daily specials such as New Zealand lamb or a superb swordfish sautéed in butter are all finished expertly and presented artfully. "

The menu changes regularly, so look for new and interesting things. Good pizzas, delicious crostini, tasty meat dishes, yummy pastas. If you're a vegetarian, you'll find a lot for you here. Desserts are the weakest part of the meal. The ever-changing wine selection is a plus. On the downside, the place is tiny, the noise is overbearing, and the service is uneven. But the food is enough to overlook that.

Pane Vino Dolce

819 W 50th St, Minneapolis
612-825-3201

Italian

Peter's Grill

This is another one we've not managed to get to; neither of us works downtown and this is basically a lunch counter.

It's an old-style lunch counter, serving American diner classics at amazing prices. And in a world of pre-made pre-packaged pre-portioned food, Peter's

Grill still has a real kitchen. Every day they roast fresh turkeys, make fresh stews, bake fresh bread. The restaurant was founded in 1914 (it had to move twice), the menu hasn't changed since the 1950s, and the waitresses all look like your grandmother.

Dara Moskowitz suggests going for dinner. "Especially on Wednesday nights. My God, on Wednesday nights! That's when you can get a baked quarter-chicken, homemade celery dressing, cranberry sauce, cabbage salad (basically light, dry, very good cole slaw), mashed potatoes, and a big Peter's Grill-made roll, all for \$3.45. Three dollars and forty five cents! I'm not kidding you, I've spent that much on coffee in restaurants not ten blocks away. On Mondays and Thursdays, a similar dinner is served, with turkey and gravy: \$3.75 gets you an open-faced-sandwich-size portion; \$7.65 gets a groaning platter with soup and salad. Wander into the costliest reaches of the menu—like the fried whitefish fillet, for \$8.95—and you get a meal so large it would put a rural supper club to shame. The fish fillets are as long as my forearm, crisp as a playing card and so perfectly fried they become greaseless. They're served with homemade tartar sauce, an expanse of well-crisped hash-browns, a bowl of soup, a bowl of salad (creamy Greek dressing is best), that big old roll, and, of course, pie. Several varieties are baked daily: a very simple apple pie with the barest touch of sugar and a cinnamon-dusted crust (\$2.85); blueberry; cherry; and blackberry. There's a spicy and savory pumpkin pie on Mondays all winter. (You'll know it's summer when coconut cream comes in to replace it.)"

Zagat's: "Watching over Downtown since 1914, this American 'soda fountain' institution is said to be the city's oldest eatery and its 'lifelong waitresses' have slung hash for everyone from local suits to President Clinton ('Bill liked it'); grill groupies of this 'unapologetic' 'period piece' advise 'save room for the apple pie.'" Yes, when President Clinton came to town in 1995, this is where he ate lunch.

Peter's Grill

114 S 8th St, Minneapolis
2nd Ave S & S 8th St
612-333-1981

American

Zagat's: F-16, D-15, S-17, C-\$11
RL, TO, PP, B, L, D, SA, GD

Pizza

Traveling the world, we've had some weird pizza. We've seen Japanese pizza with shrimp and with kiwi fruit. We've eaten pizza in Poland with BBQ sauce. We've eaten pizza in Naples with water buffalo cheese (better than you might think).

There's two kinds of pizza these days: yuppie pizza and traditional pizza. Yuppie pizza first: You can get it at Sidney's (page 74), Green Mill, Punch Woodfire Pizza, Palomino (page 70), and Figlio (page 40). Punch Woodfire Pizza is in St. Paul, which is a bit of a drive from the Hilton.

The **Green Mill** is a Minnesota classic. It's been popular forever, regularly wins various awards, and even serves pretty good pizza. Try the "Yuppie Pizza From Hell": pescara pizza with prosciutto, artichokes, onions, and goat cheese.

It's fabulous. The nachos are good, too, and a half-order is plenty to share. Other amenities include 32 beers on tap as well as a full bar. They've also got a birthday club card that gets you a free pizza on your birthday, plus dollars off other meals. We're not sure about their new "Oyster Bar" concept. The board behind the bar lists lots of wine specials, but never mentions oysters. When we asked about the kind of oysters, they said: "Raw. On the half shell." Buyer beware.

Traditional pizza is harder; there just isn't any great pizza in Minneapolis. **Pizza Lucé** is pretty good, and they have the most interesting selection of toppings... 46, to be exact. They range from meats (shrimp, meatballs, pork sausage), to vegetables (sauerkraut, artichoke hearts, broccoli, banana peppers) to everything else (BBQ mock duck, black beans, pineapple, pesto). They also have a wide variety of cheeses: parmesan, smoked gouda, gorgonzola, ricotta, cheddar, provolone, feta, goat cheese. If you want a tomato-free pizza, they have a tasty white sauce. If you want a cheese-free pizza, they have several soy alternatives. If you want a crust-free pizza, you're on your own. They have a decent menu of non-pizza alternatives. You're likely to find wheat in the sandwich bread or the pasta, so if you can't eat wheat you're also on your own.

Edwardo's serves acceptable Chicago-style pizza; Karen likes it better than Bruce does. And it is close to the hotel. None of the pizza delivery companies do a good job. We order pizza at home from Beek's, but that's the best of a bad lot. (There's more information on pizza delivery in the section on deliveries.)

Green Mill

2626 Hennepin Ave S, Minneapolis
W 26th St & Hennepin Ave S
612-374-2131

Pizza

Zagat's: F-19, D-15, S-17, C-\$14
NR, TO, GE, FP, FB, D, LL

Pizza Lucé

114 N 4th St, Minneapolis
612-333-7539

Pizza

Zagat's: F-21, D-12, S-16, C-\$12

Edwardo's

1125 Marquette Ave., Minneapolis
S 12th St & Marquette Ave
612-339-9700

Pizza

Zagat's: F-20, D-14, S-16, C-\$12
NR, TO, GE, PP, BW, L, D, SF, SA

Puerta Azul

Puerta Azul means Blue Door, but that's not accurate. There are actually two blue doors, an inner and an outer. And the restaurant would better be named La Iglésia del Ajo—the Temple of Garlic.

This particular garlic palace is Puerto Rican. A husband/wife team (he works the front of the house; she the back) spruced the place up, adding a fresh paint job, cozy tables, and brightly colored pillows. Think Caribbean—the colors, the music—without the birds. They couldn't expand it, though; there are about ten tables total, none of them large. And the whole restaurant is non-smoking.

We were there with an out-of-town attorney friend of Bruce's, who is only appearing in this review under condition of anonymity. She thought the waiter (the aforementioned husband) was cute, and she also likes garlic.

The food was wonderful. Bruce is a big fan of fried plantains, here called *tos-tones* and served with a delicious garlic mayonnaise spread that hinted of things to come. The *yuca con sofrito* was good too, a dish of yucca pieces sautéed with onions, peppers, garlic, tomatoes, olives, garlic, and cilantro. Not enough cilantro, if you ask us. For a main course we had *mofongo*, Bruce's favorite. It's marinated fried pieces of pork served with what is basically mashed plantains: think sorta-banana-flavored mashed potatoes with garlic and some meat. The pork just reeked of garlic and other spices.

Karen's chicken breast was stuffed with an extraordinary mixture of almonds, raisins, celery, onions, *yuca*, green and red peppers, garlic, and rum, served with pinto beans and rice. The aforementioned anonymous attorney ordered chicken in a mango sauce. It was the only thing not smothered in garlic, but her black bean accompaniment was. Everything was delicious.

Service was fun and friendly, if a bit slow. (I worry about the place when it gets busy.) There is fish on the menu, and a vegetarian can find a meal out of the appetizers and a beans-and-rice entrée. If you manage to find room for dessert, there are two to choose from—both made from coconut—that are delicious.

The only bad news is that this place is in St. Paul, nowhere near downtown Minneapolis. It used to be near downtown, but it moved.

Puerta Azul
1811 Selby Ave, St. Paul
651-646-7003

Caribbean
Zagat's: No ratings
TO, PP, L, D, OS, SF

Rock Bottom Brewery

We ate here once. We went to meet people and we had dinner. Unfortunately, it was before we started taking notes, and we can't remember a single thing about the meal. It must not have been too bad; it must not have been too good. Were we proper reviewers, we would have gone back. But life is too short to repeat an unmemorable experience.

This is another corporate chain, so don't expect anything inspiring. Think sandwiches and things like pork chop dinners. They did win the Best Beer Selection in the 1998 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers poll; second best in the 1999 and 2000 poll (Old Chicago beat it), and third best in the 2001 poll. Sounds like the selection is slipping.

So, what does everyone else say? *Zagat's*: "‘Damn good’ microbrews ‘made right here,’ plus ‘surprisingly’ tasty bar grub equals an experience that’s ‘better than expected’ at this Warehouse District pub; still, the rambunctious ‘after-work’ crowd responsible for the ‘consistent noise’ at this ‘happening place’ mainly shows up ‘for the beer.’"

Citysearch: “The menu represents bar food at its best, while the oak booths, English-style pub signs, and art-deco lighting envelop you in civilized comfort. Don’t expect to be seated pre-theater without a reservation: Rock Bottom is predictably packed between 6 and 8 PM. Appetizers, such as the piquant Asiago cheese dip with toasted beer bread, are meant to be shared, and everything else—from salads to desserts—could be as well. Rock Bottom smokes its own ribs, salmon (for grilling or deep-frying in a unusual version of fish and chips), chicken (for chicken enchiladas), and even the tomatoes that make an addictive companion to angel-hair pasta, garlic, and basil. Desserts—a mousse-like brownie served with ice cream and raspberry sauce, a carrot cake served with caramel sauce—add a twist to tradition. Part of a small, Colorado-based chain, Rock Bottom makes five brews, from pale ale to full-bodied stout, on-site. Several wines go for less than \$20 a bottle.”

If we walked this far, we would continue upstairs to Palomino. You’re on your own.

Rock Bottom Brewery
825 Hennepin Ave, Minneapolis
S 9th St & Hennepin Ave
612-332-2739

American
Zagat’s: F-18, D-19, S-18, C-\$17
RR, TO, FB, L, D, LM, P, OS, SA

Sapor Cafe and Bar

This is world cuisine. Not fusion, which is when various cultures meet in the pot. World cuisine is everything on the same menu, in the same dishes, prepared in new and different ways. One tasty example is the “pork chop vindaloo with blackened root vegetables” that Karen ordered one night. (The root vegetables were beets, carrots, squash, and potatoes, mixed together in a seasoned soy sauce.) Or the “spicy caramelized shrimp with plantains” that Bruce ordered. Our favorite dish on the menu is the “miso-baked salmon with wasabi potato cake, gingered vegetables, and peanuts.” The salmon was beautifully seasoned and nicely cooked, and the wasabi-brushed mashed potato cake was amazing. We’ve heard about, but have not tried, the jerk-seasoned pork chop and the vegetable samosas (served with spinach dahl and a date and cranberry chutney).

Some reviews have complained about the appetizers, but we’ve had good luck. The mixed green salad with ginger anise vinaigrette, caramelized red onions, wine-poached pear, blue cheese, and walnuts was delicious. We also liked the shrimp and plantains (above), and the “sesame-crusting calamari on roasted carrots, onions, ginger, and green olives” served with fresh cilantro. One review we read recommended ordering “any salmon entrée.”

Desserts are varied and tasty. And the wine list—a seemingly impossible task given the menu—is interesting and reasonably priced. The beers are even interesting.

The dining room is pretty, and the service is excellent. We like eating here. The only downside is that finding it can be difficult. Sapor is on a corner in the warehouse district. It’s dark and deserted at night. There’s major construction

on Washington Avenue. The restaurant is on the first floor of a building, and isn't signed very well. But keep looking; Sapor is worth the effort.

Sapor Cafe and Bar

428 Washington Ave N, Minneapolis
612-375-1971

World Cuisine

RR, FP, BW, BA, L D, LL, R, T

Sidney's

We expected **Sidney's** to be corporate trendfood. Our first glance over the menu, while waiting for a table, dismayed: mock Italian-Asian ingredients. Sure, we thought, Asian Spicy Chicken pizza *might* be tasty, but with cheese? The room was packed with bubbly tables of trendy folk enjoying themselves.

But we went ahead with our meal, and were surprised and pleased to find that it was good. Located on Hennepin near Franklin (the former Shelly's Woodroast site, for those who live around here), Sidney's seems to be doing what Good Earth tried and failed at: making good, mostly organic, food.

Sidney's menu lists the ingredients in every dish, so you know what you're getting—nice for folks who watch what they eat. The menu runs to pasta and risotto, calzones, salads and wrap sandwiches. They also make pizzas (and demand for these outstrips their pizza oven's capacity, so that the wait for pizza can be tiresome during busy times). We didn't have the gumption to try that Asian pizza, nor the PB&J pizza for kids, but Bruce's "Margherita pizza" (with Roma tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, basil, garlic, and added goat cheese) was very tasty. Karen ordered the huge Shanghai Shrimp wrap, which was just delicious: veggies and shrimp in a lightly sweet, decently hot lime-chili vinaigrette. Beside this delight, the accompanying marinated vegetables (red onions and green beans with a bit of pointlessly-trendy quinoa) were entirely flavorless. Neither of us left hungry and ignoring the small dish of veggies was easy. Skip the darker wheat bread in the bread basket (which tastes as if it were made mostly of organic sawdust), but the lighter wheat bread was fabulous, and both came to the table warm.

Another delight was the fresh-pressed Granny Smith apple juice. Though it looks as if one is drinking pea soup, the juice is crisp and tasty, and worth a second glass.

Sidney is the owner's father, who otherwise has no connection with the restaurant. (He has eaten there.) Shelly (of Shelly's Woodroast, mentioned above) and John (Sidney's son) are business partners. We guess "Shelly's" sounded too much like the old restaurant, and "Sidney's" sounded better than "John's."

Sidney's is a popular restaurant, and gets good reviews. *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine*, for example, votes Sidney's the second-best restaurant for casual dining. Their pizza also wins awards for best "gourmet" (i.e., yuppie-style pizza).

Sidney's

2120 Hennepin Ave S, Minneapolis
W 22nd St & Hennepin Ave S
870-7000

Pizza

Zagat's: F-22, D-20, S-20, C-\$17
TO, FP, BW, B, SB, L, D, LL, SF, OS

Staccato

This restaurant opened up last November; we haven't had a chance to go. The only reason we're including it is its downtown location and the single review we found in *Minnesota Monthly*.

The menu is basically American food: prime rib (only available on weekends), salmon, grilled shrimp, ribs, pizzas, burgers, etc. The single review was mixed; the reviewer liked some dishes and disliked others. (We don't entirely trust this reviewer, so without corroboration we are hesitant to reprint his pronouncements.)

We presume other magazines will review this restaurant, probably in that irritating interval between us freezing the text of this restaurant guide and actual publication. If you go, let us know how it is.

Staccato

1125 Marquette Ave S, Minneapolis
612-375-9009

American

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This Minneapolis downtown restaurant, with its delightfully booksy name, is a second location of the establishment that used to share a building with St. Paul's finest independent bookseller, the Hungry Mind, on Grand Ave. It's the exact place you want to go after you spend an hour or three browsing, and need something elegant and fine to restore body and soul. Though the St. Paul location closed last year, and there's no bookstore near the Minneapolis location, it's still a lovely oasis.

They've got a lounge that is currently riding the cocktails craze with lots of specialty martinis. Though the space is not that big, the dining room is nicely separate from the noisier, smoky bar, and is calm and quiet.

It's funny: the plain, sans-serif font with which they print the menu starkly contrasts with the nice white tablecloths, candle-lit tables and upscale menu of the restaurant. For that matter, so does the little tag line at the bottom of the entrées page: "Hey, thanks for coming." It's almost as if they want to say, "Yeah, we're elegant, but pretension is for somebody else." How typically Minnesotan.

Our server knew the menu well, and had diplomatic things to say about everything on offer. He also had clear favorites, and we appreciated his advice. We don't know how the stuff he steered us away from was, but what we had was delicious.

The menu is best defined as "eclectic American." The night we were there, the special was grouper wrapped in Serrano ham and set on *pozole*, leek, butter-nut squash, and red bell pepper sauté, served with an orange and chile vinaigrette. It was delicious. The lamb, grilled with gorgonzola and cauliflower purée, and served with chanterelle mushrooms sautéed in *foie gras* butter and

smoked red bell pepper sauce, was just as good. We didn't order the duck breast in a five-spice and huckleberry marmalade with a radish, cucumber, and mint spring roll, but our waiter assured us it was excellent. We did order one appetizer, a barley risotto with goat cheese and tomato.

The wine list is a good one, with many selections at reasonable prices. We thought it odd that they decanted a 1995—we're not sure if it was simply pre-tension or if the bottle was stored badly—but the wine was good nonetheless.

We found the whole experience very pleasant. The room was pretty; the service was good. The background music was pleasant, and not too loud. Since then we've had a lovely catered birthday brunch for Karen in their back room. The restaurant even has free valet parking, so don't worry if you can't find a parking spot.

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1310 Hennepin Ave, Minneapolis
N 13th St & Hennepin Ave
339-1133

American

Zagat's: F-24, D-21, S-22, C-\$29
RR, VP, FP, FB, SB, L, D, OS, R, GA

Thai

Sawatdee is an upscale downtown Thai restaurant. When you walk in, you probably won't believe you're in an ethnic restaurant. The room is pretty, the waitstaff is pretty, and the food is pretty.

The food is also consistently excellent, if a bit odd. They'll make curry out of anything in this restaurant, including walleye. Their pad Thai is good (if basic), and there are many other dishes to choose from. Try Tail of Two Cities (stir-fried lobster curry and green beans) or Rama Thai Delight (shrimp or chicken on steamed spinach in a thick curried coconut milk sauce). Their roast duck curry is simmered in coconut milk with tomatoes, peas, and chilis. They also have lots of beef, fowl, and fish dishes.

The food can be hot here. We've ordered it "authentic," and been served things too hot to eat. Be warned.

A friend of ours has gone to Sawatdee for lunch, once a week, for over 14 years. Here's what she says: "Most of my experience with the restaurant has been with lunch. They can handle large parties at that time. I did go to dinner there on a Sunday evening with a party of twelve, and found the service very slow. If you have a large dinner party, you might consider giving them some warning.

"The food is the same night or day. Highlights for carnivores include the Mas-samun Beef Curry, the Erawan Steak Salad, the Holy Basil Supreme with Pork (it's also good with tofu), and Chicken with Cashews. Shrimp and Scallops in Garlic Sauce is very good, as is the Seafood with Noodles and the Seafood Soup. The fresh spring rolls are wonderful.

"The lunch buffet is a good deal. People who are sensitive to MSG have mentioned that there seems to be more of it on the buffet. You can order off the menu and request no MSG at all. If you can take some, the buffet typically has a huge fresh salad of whatever vegetables looked good, with peanut sauce or

sweet-and-sour sauce for dressing; fried wonton strips; soup; a hot curry; a mild dish with lots of vegetables; two appetizers (typically cream-cheese wontons and fried chicken wings, or egg rolls and fried noodle salad); fried rice; and plain boiled rice. The milder dish is sometimes vegetarian, and even a vegan can eat well from that, the plain rice, and the salad.

“Good vegetarian dishes include the pad Thai (also available with meat) and any of the seafood dishes; good vegan dishes include No. 42 (mock duck with vegetables), the Holy Basil Supreme with Tofu, the vegetarian spring rolls, and the tofu soup (if you like very delicate subtle flavors).

“Mild really is mild; medium is noticeable to the sensitive palate; hot is pretty hot. ‘Cannot be made mild’ is too hot for me to finish, but the flavor was not overwhelmed by hotness.”

The King and I Thai is an old downtown standby. Not nearly as haute as Sawatdee, it cooks consistently good food in a friendly atmosphere. Recently the restaurant had to move—their location was zoned for Target’s new corporate headquarters—which gave their décor a much-needed updating. Their pad Thai is excellent; the noodles are served al dente and the sauce is tasty. Their coconut curries are also good, although if you order the curry of the day you can’t go wrong. If you like a sweet peanut taste, order the *te da long song* (spinach and tomato covered in a peanut sauce); we like it with chicken. You’re unlikely to have a bad meal here.

Ruam Mit Thai Cafe is one of the better Thai restaurants, but it’s in St. Paul. (Not that there’s anything wrong with St. Paul, it’s just a little far to drive for dinner when there are good Thai restaurants within walking distance.)

Chiang Mai Thai is a new Thai restaurant in Calhoun Square. It’s a hip and trendy place in a hip and trendy location, but the food is uniformly first rate. The menu has all the traditional Thai dishes: soups, curries, stir-fries, salads, rice and noodle dishes. The fresh spring rolls were the best Thai spring rolls we’ve had in the Twin Cities.

We went there once with a group of six, so we managed to try quite a few things. The *Pla tord manao* (grilled fish with lime dressing) was our favorite. The *toam yam* (hot and sour soup) was also good, though nothing like Vietnamese hot and sour. You can order either a small bowl or a large bowl as a meal; we recommend the latter. Also good was the citrus chicken and the *gaeng Massaman* (Thai Muslim curry). Actually, everything was good.

Many of the entrées can be constructed from the menu. The *khao pad sapparot* (pineapple fried rice), for example, can be served vegetarian or with tofu, chicken, pork, beef, or shrimp. The same is true for the stir-fries and curries.

Each menu item comes with its own aphorism. The *pla tord mano*, for example, says: “During the slow season on Koh Phi Phi, the rule is: If you catch it, we all share it.” Interesting, we suppose, but not terribly useful in puzzling out the menu. The *khao cadeukadeek* is translated as chilled beef with rice and is offered with the saying: “Being a tonal language, it is not difficult for the novice to call someone a horse.” Okay, but how does that help?

Spicy food comes in four styles: “spicy,” “hot,” “really hot,” and “crazy hot.” Bruce found the “really hot” to be just about at the limit of what he could eat comfortably; Karen’s limit was “hot.” With the loss of the Sri Lanka Curry

house, it's nice to see Minneapolis restaurants offering food at the top of the spicy scale.

Chiang Mai Thai seized the crown of "most upscale Thai" from Sawatdee. The room is nice: dark wood, good tables, comfortable chairs. It's noisy enough to feel comfortable, but quiet enough to have a reasonable conversation at your table. There's also a bar at one end of the restaurant that looks pretty impressive (if you like that sort of thing). And it serves Dry Blackthorn cider (if you like that sort of thing).

There's also Bangkok Thai in Dinkytown and Taste of Thailand in St. Paul. We don't know anything about either of them.

Sawatdee

118 N 4th St, Minneapolis
1st Ave N & N 4th St
612-373-0840

Thai

Zagat's: F-21, D-17, S-17, C-\$17
RL, PP, FB, L, D, LL, LLL, LM, OS

Sawatdee

607 Washington Ave S, Minneapolis
Portland Ave S & Washington Ave S
612-338-6451

Thai

Zagat's: F-21, D-17, S-17, C-\$17
RL, TO, GE, FP, FB, L, D

The King and I Thai

1346 LaSalle Ave, Minneapolis
612-332-6928

Thai

Zagat's: F-21, D-17, S-18, C-\$15
RR, TO, PP, BW, L, D

Chiang Mai Thai

Calhoun Square / 3001 Hennepin
Ave S, Minneapolis
W Lake St & Hennepin Ave S
612-827-1606

Thai

RL, TO, PP, FB, L, D, OS

Times Bar & Cafe

The Times Bar & Cafe is not far from the IETF hotel, but that's not enough to recommend it. They have a wine list with nothing over \$30 on it, and they've got some good beers, including "Minneapolis Ale," but the bar isn't enough to recommend it, either.

And it's a pretty place, with brass rails, marble tabletops, and wood everywhere. The service is prompt and friendly, too, and they've got live music that is intimate and charming without being too loud to carry on a conversation.

We tried a couple of sandwiches. The roasted portobello sandwich was simple and good. The turkey was the real stuff, not that pressed meat product. Both were served with some nice hot fried potato wedges that are often called "home fries" hereabouts. Ours were a smidge overcooked, but at least they were hot. And at about \$8 for a sandwich, it's not expensive when compared to many downtown places.

But none of these are the reason to visit The Times. Go for the fondue.

There are several options on the menu, ranging from a \$55 choice with several all-fondue courses featuring cheese, meats, and so on to a list of several less

ambitious options. You could try one of a couple of cheese fondues. Or you could (and this is our favorite option) spend just \$12 for chocolate fondue. You'll get cake and fruit to dip in the chocolate, and it's designed for at least two people. All their fondue choices come with enough food for more than one. Clearly cooking it yourself is a social affair, and you'll want to share the experience with your friends.

The menu specifies tells us that women who drop their bread cubes in the fondue must kiss every man at the table, while men must buy everyone a bottle of wine. What with IETF demographics, it sounds like the makings of quite a party.

Times Bar & Cafe

201 E Hennepin Ave, Minneapolis
612-617-8098

American

RR, TO, DL, FB, SB, L, D, LL, LLL,
LM, CF

Vietnamese

Karen has the better Vietnamese food story: My office faces the front of our house, and I rest my eyes from staring at my computer monitor by staring out the window. A cold late winter day a few years back found me staring at a taxi cab going slowly past our house. A few minutes later, the same taxi passed again. "Someone's lost," I said to myself. When the taxi came past yet again, and disgorged a tallish, thin man in a flapping black coat and wide-brimmed hat, I said to myself, "That man's going to ring my doorbell."

Which he did. And asked for Bruce. I had to explain that Bruce was at that moment out of town, which caused this stranger to explain that he had thought Bruce would be in, and so on, and his name was Neal Stephenson, and um....

"Well, come on in," I said. Turns out, he and Bruce had crossed wires on a date to get together, and that he had several hours to kill before his plane back home. So I invited him out to lunch.

This is how I learned about *pho*. Neal suggested it for lunch, and I'd just been told of a new Vietnamese place on the West Bank, so off we went. I had no idea what I was in for, and so ordered a squid dish as he ordered the pho. I've since become a devotee of the stuff, and can go on at great length about it, but let Neal describe it:

"Vietnamese menus can be decrypted through a sort of pattern analysis; any item that begins with 'pho' is going to be an urn filled with beef, garlic, and anise broth—the nectar of the gods—with rice noodles in the bottom and some meat on top of the noodles, and tasty condiments (basil leaves, sprouts, jalapeños, lime wedges) served on the side.

"The only variable is the meat—and here I am using 'meat' in the most general sense of the word, viz.: 'something that used to be part of an animal.' The word following 'pho' is a modifier that specifies in what subsystem of the animal the meat originated. If you venture too deep into the menu, you may wind up with an unwanted lesson in veterinary anatomy. I generally stick with 'pho tai,'

which means thinly sliced steak, and no surprises. More often than not this will be the first thing on the menu.

“Actually there is one other variable: size. *Pho* is so good that if you don’t order the largest available size you will regret it. I generally make a large hoop with my arms, suggesting how big I would like the bowl to be.”

The restaurant where we ate, **K-Wok**, has many good things on the menu, including the most wonderful Malay-style coconut milk curries. It’s not the cleanest Vietnamese restaurant in town, but the service is friendly and the food is good.

Pho literally translates as “my bowl” and the fun of eating it, at least to us, is the changing taste one gets while eating one’s way to the bottom of the bowl. Start out with your *pho* just as it comes, and later add some sprouts, then some basil, then squeeze the lime over the bowl, savoring each tasty addition as you add it. Hot sauce and *hoisin* and jalapeños are usually on the table. Experiment.

Two years ago our favorite Vietnamese restaurant was **Mi Trieu Chau**.

It was your typical no-atmosphere great-food very-cheap family Asian restaurant. But the food was delicious. Now it is less so, and it’s harder to live with the blaring television and the over-bright lighting. We’re sorry to see it go.

A good candidate for replacement is **Quang Restaurant**, with excellent *pho* and *bun* and everything else. Everything is good here, but we rarely go. The problem: about a third of the time we’ve been there, they were out of *pho*. Out of *pho*? Isn’t that kind of like a Chinese restaurant running out of rice?

Our latest excellent find is **Le Bambou**, buried inside a drugstore on Nicollet Avenue. The restaurant used to be an American-style lunch counter, and in many ways still is. The booths are vintage Naugahyde, the décor is vintage 70s ugly, and the menu still has BLTs and omelets and patty melts. Ignore all of that; the few-dozen Vietnamese specialties are delicious. Two of our favorites: beef in *la lop* leaves and *Bun Cha Nuong Thang long*. The former are basically the Vietnamese equivalent of stuffed grape leaves crossed with spring rolls. Order them with *man nem* sauce, a traditional accompaniment they generally don’t serve to Americans. The latter is a traditional pork *bun* dish: marinated and grilled pork on a bed of cold noodles with carrots and cucumbers and etc. The best *bun* in the city by far. Visit the restaurant on weekend afternoon for Hue specialties.

Dara Moskowitz writes: “Wondering where, under one roof, you might fill a prescription, buy cat litter, wire money to Mexico, and wash down some Hue-city-style hot and spicy Vietnamese soup with a chocolate malt? Wonder no more.” Worth a trip.

The **Saigon Uptown** restaurant on 38th and Grand Ave. S. is another of our favorites. The spring rolls are good, the hot and spicy chicken is excellent, and the service is fast. We also like their lemon grass dishes, and there’s an extensive vegetarian section, with tofu, mock duck, and black mushrooms in a variety of preparations. One assumes they’ve had problems with Midwestern palates in the past, as a sign in fractured English reads: “Once, food have been served, it won’t be changed or returned.” Buyer beware.

The **Saigon** restaurant on Lyndale and Lake is, we think, unrelated to the 38th St. place. There's nothing wrong with it that we can think of, and we've had fine, though unmemorable, meals there.

The **Lotus Uptown**, on Hennepin between Lake and 31st, has, we think, the best spring rolls in town. The food is good though the kitchen is often slow. The big drawback here is that hot and sour soup is not on the menu. It has a build-your-own mentality for many of its dishes. You can order it as it comes, or you can add ingredients—like broccoli—at a small additional charge.

Mpls.St.Paul Magazine readers voted this the best Vietnamese in the Twin Cities, and they've got a small branch **Lotus** near the Hilton.

K-Wok

1813 Riverside Ave, Minneapolis
Riverside Drive & Cedar Ave
612-338-4238

Vietnamese

Mi Trieu Chau

2218 E Lake St, Minneapolis
Hiawatha Ave & E Lake St
612-870-3727

Vietnamese

TO, FP, BW, L, D, NCC, GD

Quang Restaurant

2719 Nicollet Ave S., Minneapolis
Nicollet Ave & W 27 St
612-870-4739

Vietnamese

FP, BW, L, D, GD

Le Bambou

2600 Nicollet Ave, Minneapolis
W 26 St & Nicollet Ave
612-874-0124

Vietnamese

NR, FP, TP, L, D, NCC, GD

Saigon Uptown

3035 Lyndale Ave S, Minneapolis
W Lake St & Lyndale Ave S
612-827-8918

Vietnamese

Zagat's: F-18, D-9, S-17, C-\$11
TO, FP, BW, L, D, MS

Saigon

317 W 38th St, Minneapolis
Pleasant Ave S & W 38 St
612-822-7712

Vietnamese

Zagat's: F-18, D-9, S-17, C-\$11
TO, FP, BW, L, D, MS, NCC

Lotus Uptown

3037 Hennepin Ave S, Minneapolis
W Lake St & Hennepin Ave S
612-825-2263

Vietnamese

Zagat's: F-20, D-11, S-16, C-\$12
RL, TO, BW, L, D

Lotus

113 W Grant St, Minneapolis
LaSalle Ave & W Grant St
612-870-1218

Vietnamese

Zagat's: F-20, D-11, C-16, C-\$12
RL, TO, BW, L, D

How to Order Eggs

by Karen Cooper

I love breakfast out. I like the foods, I like lingering over the paper and a fourth cup of coffee, and I especially like having someone else do the work.

I've been the waitress on the breakfast shift, and never lingered over anything—we never had enough help. Much of the time, I'd be responsible for waiting on at least 10 tables, running the cash register, and bussing tables. Plus the little things like setting up for lunch and washing dishes. It was an amazing amount of work, really. Being the customer is much nicer.

I've also been the breakfast cook. That job's easier. I didn't have to deal with unreasonable customers. I didn't have to bus tables, wash dishes, or run the cash register. I only had to deal with crabby waitrons. Sure, we cooks had to do a lot of prep, but we also had a special camaraderie. And we spoke almost entirely in Spanish, which was fun all by itself.

These are high-pressure, low-paying jobs. And I have a lot of sympathy for those still in the trenches on either side of the window. Because I know just what these folks have to do to earn their livings, as a customer I don't add to their problems.

There is a relationship between you and your server. There's even a lesser, but real, relationship between you and the host, the cook, the busboy, and the dishwasher. They all have prescribed jobs to do, and you can either help them or hinder them. Top restaurants play down this relationship, and indeed the marvelous service you get at really good restaurants is designed to make you feel special and welcome and important. That's part of what you pay for, and when well done, it's a seamless and lovely experience.

But we rarely go to breakfast at top restaurants. They aren't even open for breakfast. This must be because the best restaurants serve food from cultures that think coffee and a roll suffice to start the day. Or perhaps it is because the profit margins on breakfast are so slender; people won't pay much for eggs and pancakes. And perhaps the leisurely pacing of a high-quality restaurant meal is anathema to the get-in-and-get-out timing of breakfast. We've got to get on with our day, after all.

Around here, we only have a few options. There's the hotel dining room, and while it is neither fast nor cheap, it can be quite good. There are specialty places that only serve breakfast (and sometimes lunch) before closing around 3 PM. These are usually good, and sometimes are fast, but aren't your cheapest option. And there's always those chain restaurants (e.g., Denny's, Embers, and Perkins) which are open 24/7 and which are, let's be honest, the lowest of the low. This is where to get fast and cheap. My hope is to help you get something good as well. If you understand the complex relationships between you and everyone involved in food service, you're far more likely to get a good meal than if you don't.

So, you're at the breakfast place, and perhaps it's a little frantic. Lots of people want some breakfast, and they want it now. The restaurant staff understands this and the best of them are used to working in "crisis mode" all the time. The

good ones generally like their jobs, and often, the better they are at those jobs, the more they like their work. And if the staff is new, shorthanded, or poorly trained, they're even busier. Restaurant workers who aren't good at their jobs waste time, waste steps, forget things...you've all experienced the effects. But no matter what the skill level of the staff, if you can make their jobs easier, so much the better for everybody.

Your server wants to approach your table basically four times. She wants to 1) greet you and take your beverage order, 2) bring your beverages and take your breakfast order, 3) bring your food, and 4) clear the dishes and leave the check. This doesn't take into account her numerous trips to refill your coffee cup, and it doesn't take into account her extra trip for something special you might need. It's a rough rule of thumb.

Sometimes you can combine steps 1 and 2, if the server is not busy. If she's got someone else's hot food waiting in the window, she might have time to ask if you want coffee; she won't have time to take your breakfast order. She'll let you know. When she does have time to take your order, you can speed things up by already knowing what you want, having decided all your options. Remember, she's busy. (She just got a new table.) It's frustrating for a waitress to stand and wait while her customers decide what to eat. (Now her call light has gone off, and she's got some more hot food up.) Waitresses are almost always overworked, and there is almost never enough staff in a restaurant to do all that has to be done. (That party of four is waving their coffee cups around; they want more decaf.) If you don't believe me, ask any server. (If she's got time to answer your questions, because two of her tables just left and are standing at the register, and the manager should be cashiering, but he went to the bank, and the busboy's late again, so she has to clean those tables and here comes some new people—"Oh, *please* don't sit there yet!")

Customers don't know any better. They've been told that The Customer Is Always Right, and other such nonsense, all mottoes handed down by the very same company directors who refuse to put enough employees on the floor to make those mottoes actually true. The balance is always between labor costs and profits, and the front-line, bottom-level employees are expected to make the restaurant profitable. They're working, sometimes struggling, sometimes sinking entirely, and they know one fussy customer can push the whole place right over the edge. I know better, and I consider it my job not to be that customer.

I never sit at a dirty table. If there's a sign on display reading "Please wait to be seated," I never seat myself. I read the menu, and figure out in advance of being asked if I want, say, toast or pancakes, or whatever I might have to decide between. I minimize the trips my waitron must make to my table by knowing what I want, and that's just helpful.

And when I am in a busy restaurant, I don't order breakfast items that are hard to make. When there are forty people waiting in the lobby, I won't ask for a waffle. I know that the amount of aggravation caused by ordering dry toast just isn't worth it when the whole place is "in the weeds," and has been for hours. (And I'll get up and leave, not finish the paper or have that last cuppa. I know when they need the table, and I never think that my needs come first.)

The food that the customers order makes a huge difference on how good their meal is. One example: There are only two waffle irons in the kitchen. You and

your five friends all want a waffle. So the cooks make two, and then two more, and then two more, and it takes maybe three minutes for each pair. And the first set of waffles will sit under a heating lamp for at minimum six minutes, and maybe longer, because when the last two waffles hit the window, your waitress might have just started taking the order for the party of four next to you, none of whom have decided if they want whole wheat or white toast, but all of whom insist they are ready to order.

While your waitress asks them, one at a time, what they want, the waffles are cooling off, and the cook flips them over so the bottoms don't get soggy. Now the first batch is 10 minutes old, and when your waitress scoops some butter onto them it doesn't melt—they've cooled off too much. So she microwaves them, and they get soggy, and she takes them out, and you complain you'd like to have a hot, crisp waffle, and so the entire order goes back to the kitchen to be remade, except that now the cooks have five other waffle orders, and you just wiped out the kitchen. It might take hours for them to get caught up again.

This sort of thing happens every day.

What you order can make or break the kitchen, and that means your breakfast. In a busy place, you'll be much happier if you order something the kitchen can make easily. Really.

Since we're talking breakfast, we can't get away from eggs. I figure I've probably cooked about half a million eggs in my kitchen days. At the top of my form, I could crank out breakfast plates at a rate of three meals a minute for as long as the rush lasted, and that worked out to about 1400 eggs a day. There's not much about restaurant breakfasts I don't know, including what happens when you throw a whole egg into the deep fryer.

These are the basic ways you can order eggs:

Over Easy: A fried egg, flipped over and cooked long enough to set the whites on top. Also called "eyes closed," it's one of the easiest eggs for the kitchen to make. Almost nothing can go wrong here.

Over Medium: A bit more well done than easys. All the white will be set, and the yolk will start to cook. Another easy egg to cook.

Over Well: Cooked all through, but the yolk's not broken. Often a little crispy around the edges. Not every cook makes a distinction between these and over hard, so if you want to make sure the yolk is not broken, tell your server. A little hassle for the kitchen, but they can handle it.

Over Hard: Cooked all through; broken yolk. No problem cooking this one. When the eggs are old, over hard is all you can make. I have gone through as many as three dozen eggs, trying to get two that wouldn't break when I flipped them.

Sunny Side Up or Eyes Open: These are cooked on the bottom only, and are generally a bit runny on top, because your breakfast cook is working with the burners too hot and the eggs are cooking too fast. The fix for this is to make 'em over easy, and then peel the eyes open with a finger tip. Breakfast cooks do this with most sunny sides anyway, because we flip all fried eggs as a matter of course. Just like we butter all toast, which is why most of the time if

you order dry toast it comes with butter on it anyway. It's reflex behavior—we can't help it.

Scrambled: Either these eggs were broken and scrambled yesterday, or they're done to order. Neither is all that appetizing. Going into a weekend, the breakfast cook might have to make a few gallons of "scrams" as part of her prep work. This will be 40 or 50 dozen eggs, cracked into a big mixing bowl, maybe mixed with water or milk or cream or maybe not stretched with anything. This will be mixed up thoroughly by a mixer if the cook is lucky, or by hand with a giant whisk if she's not. Any stray pieces of egg shell sink, and that's good, because that cook wants to get her prep done and go home—she's been there since 5:30 in the morning. The eggs will be poured into several smaller gallon buckets, and left in the cooler overnight. The eggs discolor slightly before they're used—the more orange the eggs the longer they've been out of the shell. This bucket of scrams will be put in a larger bucket of ice and set next to the stove or grill for the rush. The ice keeps the stuff cold, more or less, and a 4-oz. ladle equals two eggs; a dipper and a half makes an omelet.

If the eggs are cracked to order, there's a good-sized bowl and whisk within a hand's reach of the stove. They won't be mixed with water or milk—there's no time. The problem with this is that the bowl usually isn't washed all morning, and it ought to be.

Poached: Eggs dropped into a pot of boiling water. You can order them soft, medium, or hard. There're a couple of problems with poached. First, the water in that pot isn't going to be changed unless the pot boils dry. It just gets added to throughout the rush. Whatever egg flotsam stays in the pot after the first set of poached eggs is still there when you order yours. At least the water's boiling. Another problem is that the cook can't see the eggs, and generally overcooks at least a couple of sets before pulling yours out of the water before they overcook, too. This slows down the entire kitchen, but it also slows down your breakfast. On a bad day, you'll have to wait an extra ten or more minutes because you ordered poached.

Basted: Sunny side up, sort of. These eggs aren't flipped. They're cooked to about sunny side, and then a little water is added to the pan, and a lid is put on it. In a minute or so, the water will have boiled away, and the white on top of the egg will be nicely set. I always order basted eggs, even though I know that most of the time the water to steam them has been dipped out of the poached pot. Not too hard to make.

Soft-Boiled: Not available. There is no clock on the stove, and nobody's got time to coddle your breakfast. (No, coddled eggs aren't available either.)

Hard-Boiled: Sure, but why? These will be cooked in the same water as the poached eggs. This will take a while, because again, the cook can't see them, and will forget the eggs are there. And there is no timer in the kitchen, so getting them cooked through is a crap-shoot.

Omelets: See the scrambled eggs discussion.

Whites Only: There's no egg separator in the kitchen, and nobody's got time to pour the yolks from shell-half to shell-half like seems so clever. The cook is going to crack the eggs into her hand (hey, Dorothy Parker did it this way), let the whites run through her fingers into the pan, and then toss the yolks into the scrams bucket. Yuck.

Egg Beaters, Eggstra, Eggstrordinaire: You can get an omelet or scrambled eggs with this stuff. The only problem comes when nobody thawed it out (it's delivered frozen) yesterday. You can microwave it to thaw it, but it doesn't defrost evenly, and it's kind of runny and thin when thawed in this way.

When in doubt, order your eggs over easy. They're simple and fast to make, and the only thing that can go wrong is when the eggs keep breaking. Even I will admit that there's a limit to what you, the customer, can possibly affect.

To have as seamless and pleasant experience as possible, pay attention to all the ways you can affect your breakfast out. You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, you just might find you get what you need.

Restaurants at the End of the World

by Bruce Schneier

Written about Korea, in 1987

His name was Kim, and his English was pretty good. His concept of breakfast was a bowl of noodle soup in a restaurant that was about twenty-five feet long and only three feet wide.

He got two bowls of soup and sat one in front of me. He said something about "a Korean standard" and went back to the counter. When he returned he had an odd look on his face. It was an "I am about to put a raw egg in your soup" grin.

I sat there stunned, not really having a good "you just put a raw egg in my soup" look to counter with. I looked at my soup; it stared back at me with a yellow eye. Kim smiled and put an egg in his soup and stirred it around with his chopsticks. I did the same. He ate some. I did the same. All right, so it didn't taste bad.

Same trip, in the town of Yoseu (in the middle of nowhere)

The market was still crowded even though it was getting dark. A few small fires were burning on the street, and people were around them trying to stay warm. I stopped in front of what looked to be a restaurant. On the floor in front of the store were water-filled pails with things inside. I recognized squid in one, oysters in another, and clams in a third. There were three others: orange bulbous things with puckers, long brown things with puckers, and long smooth white things that half floated and half sank. I assumed they were all alive.

The woman who sat behind this menagerie looked up at me. I pointed to the orange things, pointed to the brown things, pointed at the tables inside of the store, and smiled.

She smiled back, got up and walked into the store.

I followed her. There were four long tables altogether; all empty. I sat down at the far table, facing the door.

There was a small standing heater in the center of the room with a large teapot on it, and a countertop with a sink on the left wall. Behind me was a rice paper sliding door, partly open. In that room I could see a rug, a couple of low shelves, and some pillows. There was a television on one of the shelves. It was on.

The woman brought three orange things and three brown things in from outside and proceeded to clean them. She set two bowls of water out in front of her: a green one and a white one. She cut open the orange things and put the orange insides in the green bowl, and the orange outsides in the white bowl. Then she cut open the brown things and put the brown outsides in the green bowl with the orange insides, and the brown insides in the white bowl with the orange outsides. The frightening thing was that I didn't have the foggiest idea which bowl was for eating and which was for throwing away.

After she was finished she started cutting up the orange insides and the brown outsides. All I could think at this point was: *Please cook this. Whatever you do, please cook this.*

Then I noticed that there wasn't a stove anywhere.

She put the orange and brown things on a plate and set it in front of me. Then she gave me a bowl of hot sauce for dipping, a bowl of *kimchi*, another bowl of greens, and a cup of cold tea.

I looked at my plate. I didn't even know what phylum the stuff came from.

She then presented something to me with a flourish and a big smile. I looked at it. It was a fork.

Well, I had to take it. I really didn't want it, but she probably had this fork for years, it was probably her only one, and I was probably the first American brave enough to eat here. I couldn't spoil it for her.

I took the fork and stabbed a brown thing. She was watching me as I put it in my mouth. It was chewy, but it tasted pretty good. I tried an orange thing. It wasn't as good. I smiled at her. She smiled back and went outside.

She poked her head in from time to time as I was eating. Once she brought a friend. She told her something in Korean. Probably something like: "Look at that. I gave him the orange insides and the brown outsides, and he doesn't even know the difference."

I just smiled.

Modern note: the brown outsides was of a sea cucumber. I never did identify the orange bulbous thing with puckers.

Australia, 1990

Animals evolve to fill ecological niches. Australia has the marsupial equivalent of the large ground rodent (the wombat), the marsupial equivalent of the fast ground hunter (the marsupial cat—no relation to the real one—now extinct), and the marsupial equivalent of the forest herbivore that begs for food around campsites: the kangaroo. This Australian deer ends up on dinner menus: I've seen roo steaks, roo burgers, roo pies, and roo pasties. It tastes a lot more like venison than it does chicken—probably the diet—and is actually better than you'd expect.

Australia is also the place to get a variety of weird exotic meat: camel (not memorable), crocodile (tastes like alligator, which tastes like chicken), and snake. Probably the weirdest Australian delicacy is witchity grub. The aborigines traditionally live in some pretty desolate terrain, and they've been forced to eat whatever they can catch, pick, or dig. One of the things they dig up is a large insect called a witchity grub. The one I saw was white, about four inches long, about three quarters of an inch in diameter at the widest part and tapering at the ends. I think it had lots of legs, although it may have been a worm. If the Lilliputians lived on Dune, this is what their worms would have looked like. It spends its life burrowing around and eating the roots of plants. This one was going to end up pickled in alcohol. And no, I wasn't able to try it.

Japan, again and again in the 1980s

I didn't try the turtle, either. Many years ago I would go to Japan regularly (not frequently, but regularly). I stayed at a *ryokan* near Fussa (take the train to Tachikawa and change to a train headed for Ome... but that's not important now). There was this fish restaurant near the train station. It was a small restaurant by American standards, but average by Japanese: about a dozen tables, a kitchen in the main room, and fish tanks all around. You would order something from the menu—thankfully, it had pictures—and the waiter would march over to one of the tanks with a net and catch your dinner.

The tanks were filled with perch, flounder, mackerel, catfish, lobster, and lots of things I didn't recognize. One of the tanks had three turtles in it. Puzzling out the pictures on the menu, you had to order the turtle feast. They served turtle sashimi, turtle in some cooked preparation with vegetables and stuff, turtle soup, turtle-meat *yakatori*, and a cup of turtle blood. (Presumably, like every other weird Asian foodstuff, it has some traditional medicinal properties.) I was interested in the turtle; I really was. But it was triple the cost of everything else on the menu, and I didn't really relish the thought of drinking a cup of turtle blood. So I didn't order it. Then, in 1990 I changed jobs and moved to Chicago, and never went back to the restaurant. And for the past decade I have forever regretted not ordering the turtle blood.

Havana, 1996

Cuba has two parallel economies, one in local pesos and the other in American dollars. There's no regular exchange rate; foreigners aren't supposed to buy things in stores that take pesos. And honestly, there's nothing that pesos can buy that's really worth buying.

We were wandering through a flea market in Havana. Bruce had seen these markets before—Riga, Sofia, Istanbul, Rangoon—piles of stuff Americans wouldn't look at twice before throwing out: clothes, machine parts, plastics, weird Western and communist products, bootleg Duran Duran tapes. Someone was selling cardboard boxes of food, the size of a small tissue box. Not tourist food; local food. And hot.

Karen talked with the seller (as best she could; Cubans talk fast and have a difficult accent). We had to buy forks.

Surely someone in the market sold forks. We eventually found a bagful of plastic ones. I handed over a dollar. I got the forks and a small pile of filthy banknotes. With the change I bought two boxes.

It wasn't pretty.

It was a box of flavored rice with little bits of stuff. In the middle was a piece of meat...well, it was a piece of fat. I thought it was okay; Karen was much less thrilled. We gave most of her box to a nearby street person. And nearby was a tourist restaurant that served barbecued chicken, at about \$10 per serving.

Of course, it's against U.S. law to engage in commerce with Cuba. The above story is pure fiction.

France, 1985

It was my first year out of college and my first international trip (not counting Canada). Jay and I organized the trip around eating at this Michelin three-star restaurant in Rheims. I wrote this soon after:

We also had our dinner at a three star restaurant: Boyer "Les Crayeres." It was wonderful. It opened with a *Salade Pere Maurice*, whoever he was. The next course was *le Petit Chou Farci Langoustines des Glenans, Sauce Coraline*, which was lobster wrapped in baby cabbage leaves in an incredibly delicious sauce. After that was *le Panache de Poissons Grilles au Beurre de Caviar*, or three types of fish in a butter sauce accompanied by their respective caviar. This was followed by *le Pigeonneau Roti a l'ail Doux et au Persil*, or roast pigeon with garlic. For dessert we had *le Nougat Glace Sauce Abricot au Miel*, which was a wonderful vanilla nougat with an apricot sauce. Of course there were hors d'oeuvres, a cheese cart, and pastries after dinner. We had a Sancerre to accompany the meal.

What I was too embarrassed to admit when I wrote that story was that the entire menu was chosen by our waiter, except for the pigeon. Neither of us had ever had pigeon, and we were interested. It was the weakest item on the menu.

In 1995 I was back in France, back in Rheims, and Karen and I visited the same restaurant. The chef from 1985 was gone, replaced by his son. The menu was different, but the food was wonderful. And this time we also stayed overnight at the hotel.

Peru, 1996

Guinea pig is a traditional Incan delicacy, and figures heavily in the culture. In a church in Cuzco, there's a large painting of the last supper where Jesus and disciples are obviously eating guinea pig. It's called *cuy*, and it's still served today.

Karen and I were in Peru with two professor friends of mine; they spend a lot of their time teaching mathematics to third-world children. We had all just come from a day of teaching in a rural Peruvian school. Some official was taking us out to eat: us, my two friends, the official, and her small daughter.

The restaurant was someone's backyard. There were a few small signs in Spanish that implied that it was a commercial backyard, but it was a backyard nonetheless. And were going to have *cuy*.

"No thank you," I said. "We had *cuy* last night."

In fact we did. Last night we were in Cuzco, and I wanted to try *cuy*. Karen and I went to a real restaurant; she ordered something normal and I ordered *cuy*.

Cuy, Cuzco style: Take one guinea pig, larger than you find in an American pet store. Kill and skin. Cut the thing in half lengthwise. Gut, more or less. Grill. Arrange daintily on a plate, head to the side and legs down. Serve. Run before patrons react.

It was all I could do to cover the head artfully with my napkin.

I ate it. There's not a lot of meat on a Guinea pig, and there was nothing to disguise its origins. There was nothing really to say for it, other than "that's explicit."

But that was yesterday, and neither of us wanted to repeat the experience.

"All they have here is *cuy*," our host explained.

Oh.

Cuy, rural style: Kill and skin as before. Cut, this time leaving the entire head for the honored guests. Bread. Fry. Serve, just as explicitly as before.

This was better. The breeding bulked it up a bit, so there was more to eat. The breeding also disguised the rodent bits a little, so it was easier to eat. And it was tasty. Even so, we Americans were having a hard time of it. Our host was eating heartily, and her daughter spent the entire time gnawing on a head. I suppose that was the good part.

Random Bits

In Slavic countries, you start calling restaurants "pectopants." Trust me on this one.

In Thailand, you start calling Coca-Cola "fan."

In Argentina, dinner starts at 10:00 PM. If you show up at a restaurant much earlier than that, you're the only ones eating and the waitstaff looks at you like you're from Mars or something.

In 1997, I had to go to China for a conference. The flight takes forever—they serve three meals on board—and when you land, you're exhausted. We got to our hotel, checked in, put our things away, and stumbled down to the several hotel restaurants. It was some weird time of day, and only one was open. They had an English menu, translated even more poorly than one might expect, but we were grateful for the pointers. Karen ordered soup with whitebait. She innocently assumed it was a fish soup, and the name was a charming typo for whitefish. How bad could it be?

Whitebait are tiny dried fish, white, eel-like, with little black eyes. They're served whole, floating around in the clear soup like an overcrowded pail of, well, bait. It's about the most unappetizing thing you can imagine after traveling for two days.

Japan is one of the only countries that still whales commercially. They eat it too; it's called *kujira*. In 1998 I finally managed to track a *kujira-ya* (a whale restaurant) down, and dragged Karen along. We ordered it both raw and cooked.

What can I say? It's oily, it's strong. It's definitely not fish. It's not bad, but it wasn't worth the search. And the restaurant had a stack of English-language pro-whaling propaganda available.

Vilnius, Lithuania (written in 1993)

I ate dinner in a Soviet-style restaurant, at a state-run hotel. The dining room was bleak, with tables scattered around an empty dance floor. Most of the lights were unlit, presumably in an attempt to save electricity. The staff was all elegantly dressed, surly, and with no conception of service. It took ten minutes for a waiter to bring me what looked like the only menu in the place: in Lithuanian, Russian, English, German and French. It was the same uniform-pre-printed-menu-for-all-restaurants deal I had seen in so many other Baltic restaurants. There were pages of dishes on the menu, but only a few of them had prices printed next to them: these were the only ones available. "There is no soup," the waiter warned me. I ordered a plate of black caviar (where else could I get an entire plate of caviar for \$5?) and a veal dish. What I got was some very good caviar and a rolled piece of veal with a vaguely Middle-Eastern cream sauce, fried potato wedges, cold beets and cold peas. And dark bread. And mineral water. It tasted like it was made during the last five-year plan and shipped from Central Restaurant Headquarters in Moscow. I skipped dessert.

Krakow, Poland, same trip

We found a hotel room, and had dinner at what both our travel guides called the best restaurant in Poland: Wierznok. It was in a beautiful old building; all the walls were decorated with medieval weapons. Our table was on the third floor. According to our waiter, both Bush and Gorbachev ate there (at separate times). I had cold herring, roast duck with apples, potatoes, and asparagus, and chocolate cake for dessert. Hania had a similar menu. When the bill came it translated to \$24, for the two of us. We both laughed out loud, and decided to come back the next night.

Nepal, on the way from Katmandu to Pokara (written in 1991)

We stopped in a one-street town called Mugling, which only exists because it is halfway between Katmandu and Pokara. All the buses stop there; they have no choice.

The town looked like something out of the American Old West. There was one wide, unpaved street with sand blowing this way and that. It was hot. It was uncomfortable. "This town doesn't even rate a horse," I said to the person standing next to me. He nodded.

I walked into one of the dilapidated restaurants. It was filled with Nepalese men shoveling food into their mouths with their right hand. I sat down at the only free table in the place, across from a Nepalese man.

He smiled at me and pointed at his food. I nodded, and he called out to one of the servers. She brought me a large sectioned metal plate. The double-sized section held rice, and the other three sections had curried potatoes and cabbage, chopped greens, and cold stewed tomatoes. I also got a bowl full of *dhal*, and a glass of water that I didn't touch. Another server brought me a spoon, but that was for sissies.

Actually, it was a lot of work getting used to shoveling food into my mouth by hand. The man across from me thought it was all pretty funny—me attempting some decorum by picking things up with only my fingers while everyone else had rice and stuff covering their entire hands. To make matters worse, since I am left-handed the only way I could force myself to use my right hand was to sit on my left hand.

Even better, it was all you could eat. The serving women would ply the aisles with large bowls of everything, slopping more on your plate if you wanted. The food was delicious, the atmosphere was enjoyable, and I had a great time—best fifty-cent meal I have ever eaten.

In Burma, on the same trip, I ate barbecued sparrow. I can't remember anything about how it tasted, but I do remember that there's not much meat on a sparrow. Cicadas are another Burmese delicacy. Paul Theroux has a wonderful story about eating them in *The Great Railway Bazaar*. I was never able to find any.

1997, that China trip

For one reason or another, our Chinese hosts took Karen and me to a Dai restaurant for a traditional ethnic meal of snake. "Snake served five ways," we were told.

The Dai are very up-front about their snakes. They bring it to the table, alive and wiggling. Then, using scissors, they cut the head off right there (presumably so you're sure you're getting a fresh snake), and drain the blood into a glass. A few more cuts, and they drain the bile into another glass. Then back to the kitchen with the snake.

After we recovered from the spectacle, we were served snake meat in a mild sauce with vegetables, fried snake skin (delicious), and snake-bone soup (very good). And a cup of the blood and a cup of the bile.

Both the blood and bile were mixed with some nasty alcohol, and the whole thing tasted terrible. Thankfully, the glasses were tiny. Karen and I both drank it. I finally erased the decade-old black mark from not ordering the turtle blood.

Final Thoughts: What We've Learned

When we took this job, we figured it would be a lot of fun to pontificate about restaurants and food. But while it's easy to be opinionated, communicating those opinions in an interesting and instructive manner is harder. We each had a different vision of the guide—how it would look, what it would say, how it would work—and we changed our plans to suit each other. We didn't always have the same reactions to the restaurants we visited, and we tried to represent both points of view. We didn't always agree on the next restaurant to try. And the topic sometimes felt irritatingly limited. As a professional restaurant reviewer told us, "There's a limit to how many ways you can say, 'Tasty.'"

Going in, we knew there were a lot of good restaurants in the Twin Cities. Heck, there are many fine restaurants just downtown and in South Minneapolis, and we didn't really touch on the suburbs or St. Paul. Nevertheless, our tour of the scene gave us some surprises.

The top restaurants delighted us. We always enjoy getting back to Aquavit Goodfellows, and D'Amico Cucina. These players have worked hard on building their reputations.

The cheapest ethnic places are wonderful. Some of the best food in town is in hole-in-the-wall places like Shuang Cheng or Taco Morales—or restaurants slightly better: Gardens of Salonica, Saigon, and Me Gusta. There are many others. Don't be afraid to walk into some zero-ambiance dive. Likely you'll be pleased with the food and the price.

The high end is getting better, and it's still affordable, at least for special occasions. The week before we put this guide to bed, we took an out-of-town guest to D'Amico Cucina. This is one of the best Twin Cities restaurants, and is priced accordingly. Still, without wine the bill came to only \$50 a person. That's a lot, but in New York the bill would have easily been 50% more. In Paris and London—double. Aquavit's three-course special is probably the biggest fine-dining bargain in the Midwest.

As with any journey, we missed more than we saw. It's amazing to think of all the restaurants we didn't review, many of them downtown: Backstage at Bravo, La Cucaracha. Eat This opened, and then closed, between when we started writing this guide and when we finished. Perhaps we'll be more efficient next time.

A great surprise is that we had so few truly bad experiences. With only a couple of exceptions, service and food ranged from “nothing to complain about” to “excellent.” We found it hard to have a merely disappointing meal out.

And lastly, reviewing restaurants is fun. Like any hobby, it has its own minutiae. Tasting and comparing, observing and critiquing, sharing and savoring: all of these things made us more discriminating customers. We found that attending to the nuances of dining out heightened our enjoyment of the meal. We hope that we have successfully passed on some of what we learned, and that you enjoyed reading this guide half as much as we enjoyed writing it.

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What the Codes Mean

For every restaurant we think someone might visit, there's information. Practical information, like the name, address, phone number, and location of the restaurant. Theoretically useful information, like the Zagat's rating codes. And information ranging from the extremely useful, such as whether the restaurant is accessible by skyway and whether reservations are required, to the exceedingly frivolous, such as whether the place has interesting oysters or bad art.

Note that all area codes are 612, unless otherwise specified.

Here's a brief explanation of all the codes.

Zagat's

- F Food Rating
- D Décor Rating
- S Service Rating
- F Food Rating

0-9	poor to fair
10-19	good to very good
20-25	very good to excellent
26-30	excellent to perfection

- C Cost Rating

Estimates the cost of dinner with one drink and tip, as of about a year ago. Lunch is about 25% less.

Codes

- 24 Open 24 hours
- 32B 3.2 Beer
- AE Gray/Grey
- AT Afternoon Tea
- B Breakfast
- BA Bad Art
- BSO Buddhist Shrine with Oblaten
- BW Beer and Wine Only
- CF Cheese Fondue
- D Dinner
- Da Dancing
- Da Darts
- DL Delivers
- FB Full Bar
- FP Free Parking

- GA Good Art
- GD Good Deal
- GE Delivers—Gourmet Express
- GG Good for Groups
- IO Interesting Oysters
- IWL Impressive Wine List
- KF Kid Friendly
- L Lunch
- LL Open Late (11:00 PM)
- LLL Open Very Late (12:30 AM)
- LM Live Music
- MS Mismatched Silverware
- NCC No Credit Cards
- NR No Reservations
- OS Outdoor Seating
- P Pool
- PP Pay Parking
- PW People Watching
- R Romantic
- RE Reservations Essential
- RL Reservations Recommended for Large Parties
- RR Reservations Recommended
- SA Skyway Accessible
- SF Smoke Free
- SS Sit with Strangers
- T Trendy
- TO Take Out
- TOO Take Out Only
- VG Video Games
- VP Valet Parking
- W Waterfront