



joe cone

tip of the tongue

On Sunday mornings after we've devoured the color Pages insert and the funnies and have begun desperately picking the bones of the Register-Guard looking for a little nourishing print, we usually wind up at the entertainment ads, hoping for salvation. And in recent weeks, with all the restaurant ads, we haven't been denied.

Now, cheek to jowl with the Texas Chainsaw Massacre movie ad may not be the most appetizing place to consider one's Sunday dining options. But one thing you can say about the eatery marquees — they're not pulling any punches either.

Notice the number of restaurant coupons and special dinner discounts recently? The reason isn't hard to find. The restaurant business — especially non-fast foods — has been in a slight decline on a national basis, and based on recent local advertising, Eugene-area restaurants are feeling inflation's pinch as well.

So there we were Sunday morning, bundled in our bathrobes, hulking over our tea cups, once again noticing the special dinner deal at the North Bank restaurant: Two snapper dinners for \$10.95.

I spent the rest of the afternoon agonizing about not having Topsiders to wear for the occasion. But along about 7 p.m., sartorial inhibitions as well as any memories of breakfast had vanished, and we materialized at the door of the fashionable North Bank.

The North Bank certainly aims to please. Inside, the year-old restaurant's open dining room is arranged on several levels, all of them offering a view of the Willamette River just downstream from the Ferry Street Bridge.

Even though it wasn't Friday night and I'm not a junior executive, I still appreciated the expensive view of cottonwoods, hickory and other green Oregoniana along the riverbank. World Trade Center diners, eat your hearts out.

Inside the North Bank, hanging plants, bamboo lighting fixtures, wood and glass attempt to create that "natural posh" look so in vogue in restaurant decor in recent years. Here, one

may have a sense of "informality" or of hype, depending on one's orientation.

Something similar can be said of the food, as it turns out. Dinner generously includes both salad bar and soup, entree accompanied by a rice pilaf, vegetable side dish and french bread — all good, but a little unexciting.

Beginning at the top, the salad bar was what Eugeneans expect and Eugene restaurants now flub at their peril: fresh vegetables were available in variety and abundance. The chicken soup, as the first

cooked item of the evening, set up a pattern that was not departed from. The ingredients here also were obviously fresh, and the cream and wine underpinning of the stock still had legs — but the overall creation came off a bit flatfooted.

My personal analysis, aided by a glass of house Chablis (Robert Mondavi, \$2.75 the half-liter) and omniscient pocket calculator, recommends less caution with spices.

Less caution with spices could have been the motto for the snapper entree as well. It's certainly preferable to "non mi

tangere," or "nolo contendere."

We tried each other's dishes — yes, I knew this was not a Chinese restaurant; the man in the madras sportcoat wiped his mouth with considerable emphasis when he saw us — but both the snapper "creole" and the batter-fried-with-shallots version had flavor without any flair. The rice pilaf was fine, but the spongy French bread should have been cooked hotter.

The menu's other entrees include several fresh fish preparations, a variety of steaks, and shellfish. The average price is

about \$8. A decent wine list and an extensive selection of coffee drinks and desserts allows one to savor, as the evenings continue to favor us, the relaxed atmosphere at the North Bank.

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