

Rice and Beans and Beyond

Exploring Eugene's cheaper eats BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

Just before I started planning for this issue of *Chow!*, *Willamette Week's* "Cheap Eats" issue landed on my desk. According to our illustrious alt-weekly neighbor to the north, "cheap" is defined as \$10 and under for breakfast or lunch and \$15 and under for dinner.

Huh. Were they serious? Yes, though admittedly Portland's prices are not Eugene's. But me? I was inspired. Sure, "cheap" means something different to everyone; it's an eminently debatable term. What are cheap eats here in Eugene? I set a \$5 daytime and \$7 evening price cap — and a "no chain food" rule — and set out to find a few options.

Some of Eugene's cheaper eats are legendary: **Burrito Boy's** bean and cheese burritos, for one. These \$2 monstrosities can keep a person fed for up to 12 hours, no joke (especially if you drop \$.75 more for rice). **Café Yumm!**'s many delightful bowl options come in under-\$5 sizes and leave you full but in slightly less of a food coma than a giant burrito might. If you've never tried the edamame bowl, you're truly missing out: Opt for brown rice and Yumm! sauce with your soybeans and nori (extra nori recommended) when you feel like a break from the also-delicious jazzy and smoky Yumm! bowls. More wondrous vegetarian cheap eats (and some with chicken) can be found at **Laughing Planet**. While some of the café's highlights break the \$5 mark (mmm, spanky bowl), there are inexpensive options in every category: burritos, bowls, quesadillas, salads and appetizers. Try a black jack quesadilla, with broccoli and black bean dip, or the Thai-me-up burrito, with veggies, pico de gallo and tasty peanut sauce. If you're feeling flush, you can spring for added Draper Valley chicken, tofu or tempeh to round out your dish.

For those who want a little more meat in their cheap meals ... well, how about a lot more meat? Over at **BBQ King** there's

a little thing called a King's Cup. For a fiver you get a sprawling pile of sweet, tangy baked beans, two generously portioned meats (choices include pulled pork, barbecued chicken and beef options) and cole slaw, with a slice of bread on top. Don't be fooled by the word "small" on the \$5 choice; this is a "small" dish like the Statue of Liberty is a "small" statue.

More meaty options are in the same neighborhood at **The Dog House**, which offers more than a dozen kinds of hot dogs and sausages (veggie, too). Cajun hot links, German sausages, jumbo American dogs, British bulldogs and chili dogs are always on the menu; daily specials include Hungarian garlic sausages and Black Forest beef sausages.

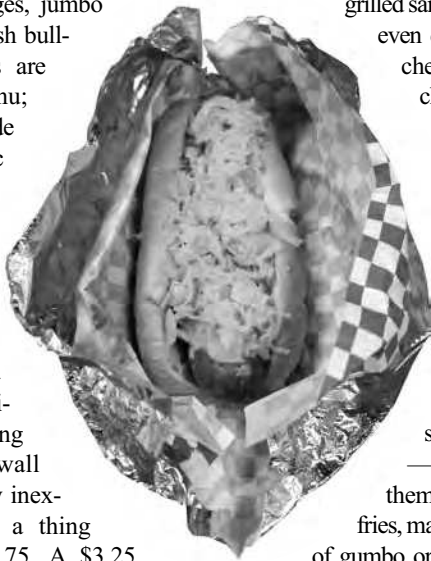
Vegetarians and meat eaters can unite in cheap glee at the **Phatty Snak Shak**, a goofily named, quirkily decorated, endearing little hole-in-the-wall with an astonishingly inexpensive menu: Not a thing costs more than \$4.75. A \$3.25 BLT comes with avocado and perfectly just-crispy-enough bacon; add a half-order of fries for a buck and a Capri Sun for 50 cents, and you're still within the \$5 cheapness spectrum. The Shak also offers veggie meatball subs and a tempeh sandwich along with a few deep-fried options (chicken strips, fish sticks).

I've been eating the **Beanery's** bean and cheese burritos for more years than I want to admit, but recently I realized their quiches are the way to go when you've eaten rice and beans too many nights in a row. At \$4.50, they sneak into the cheaper category; the Greek quiche, with spinach

for texture and feta for a sharp, cheesy tang, is perhaps the highlight of the bunch.

Eating cheaply in the evening is a little trickier. Had I set the bar at \$10, it'd be a cinch, but let's use those other three bucks toward a drink, shall we? Speaking of drinks, the combined downtown power of **Jameson's** and the **Horsehead** creates a great array of cheap dinner options (the anticipated opening of The Davis, though prices are a mystery, will doubtless add to the Olive and Broadway nightlife corner). Jameson's wee menu offers salads, rice bowls and

grilled sandwiches, many of which even qualify under my lunch-cheapness cutoff. A jack cheese, pesto and chicken sandwich was downright decadent, and the chicken curry sure sounded good too. Across the way at the Horsehead there are plenty of out-of-this-budget taste treats, but the penny pincher can order any one of the half-orders of sides (red beans and rice — wait, are we sensing a theme? — collard greens, fries, mac 'n' cheese, etc.), a bowl of gumbo or a burger with fries. For variety, hey! Get two half sides; most are \$2.75, so you'll even have extra bucks for beverages. And be warned: It claims to be a half order, but the smaller plate of bacon cheese fries is too much even for two people to finish. It's also *wonderful*. Some places skimp on the cheese with cheese fries, leaving you with a plate of dry, forlorn, naked taters at the end. Not the Horsehead. And I would be remiss to leave out the fried pickles. Wipe that grimace off your face: Can you really think of a vegetable that's *not* good when battered and deep fried? Zucchini, onions, stuffed mushrooms ... pickles are like all of those, but better, since they come with



a salty zing built right in.

Bars are a good way to go when you want to eat cheaply at night: **Sam Bond's** offers delicious pizza, **Chanterelle's** lounge dishes up a tiny but scrumptious menu and out at **Wetlands**, \$5 will get you a BLT with fries and a squeeze bottle of ranch dressing on the side. Over at the **Bier Stein**, a spinach salad so good it feels like an indulgence goes for \$6.50 (as does a pork loin salad); at \$7.50, the Stein's sandwiches just break my price rule, but they get a mention on account of being so sizable (and served with a green, potato or pasta salad) that more often than not each sandwich is a meal for two. Back on the sausage topic, the Stein also offers a German sausage appetizer plate (\$5.95) with a magically delicious two-mustard sauce.

One of the most Eugene options for a cheap dinner is **Pizza Research Institute**, where around \$4 earns you a massive and often astonishing slice of pizza that's more like a full meal on a plate. I've never met a PRI slice that disappointed or one that left me hungry. Brave the chef's choice slice; a bit of baby corn or a sliced peach might sound odd initially, but these pizza wizards know what they're doing.

One of Eugene's absolutely positively best deals is for those who want to eat a little later. Head over to **Bel Ami** after 9:30 pm, when their bistro menu takes a happy hour price dip: Everything is \$3 off. Chicken caesar salad, "crunk shrimp," small pizzas and fries with demi-glace are among the inexpensive options, and for burger junkies, the \$6.50 burger (with those amazing fries) is a steal. It's not just the food that makes Bel Ami so appealing, though; tasty cocktails, a flickering fireplace, friendly service and an admirably balanced atmosphere — both comfortable and classy — should by all rights turn this bistro into a hot spot.

Aaaaand that's all we have room for now, folks. But the truth is, this is only a starting point; there are plenty more cheap eateries around the Eugene/Springfield area. And it's perfectly possible that we'll go searching for more in the future. Suggestions? Send 'em to food@eugeneweekly.com!



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