

Day Bites

To the cafés along the way BY CHUCK ADAMS

Growing up on the Pacific Northwest coast, I knew the roadside restaurant as a mainstay of family day trips to Portland, Seattle, Mount St. Helens and campgrounds in between. My memories of these places boil down to no-frills casual dining, usually scarfing down an obscenely large burger with a thick milkshake flavored with local berries. These eateries had names like Clark's, Chuck's, the Elderberry Inn, Hump's, Oney's or the Dairy Maid. My family rarely ate out in town, but once we were on the road, away from Mom's kitchen, the desire for these on-the-way cafés grew exponentially.

Still, I'm relatively new to the Willamette Valley, so I have only a few local day trip café stories to tell. One such story came after a weekend backpacking trip with friends up the McKenzie River trail, when the **Vida Café** served me up the formidable Monster Burger, a half-pound of ground beef topped with melted Swiss and all the

fixings. Be warned: The side of home fries is equally gut busting.

Waitstaff in establishments like these are typically known for their congeniality, but our host at the Vida was a teenager with enough sass to keep us both appalled and in stitches. When we asked for cream, she turned around and said, "No, you may not." And then we waited. She came back from the kitchen empty handed. We asked her again and she threw her hands up and said, "Fine!" and then, while storming back into the kitchen, said, "You guys are so pushy!" That was it: one cook in the back and this sassy teenager running the place. After a few days of freeze-dried soup and stark wilderness, the Vida Café more than welcomed us back to society.

For those who make the long commute to southern Oregon on a semi-regular basis, the options are fairly limited. But the favorite between Eugene and Medford has to be the **K-R Drive-In** in Rice Hill. So many times I've stopped here and run into friends or friends of friends. We all like to pretend this place is our own little secret, but we're not fooling anybody. If a book were written about the best dive eateries in Oregon, the K-R would top the list. The burger and sandwich menu is nothing to gush about, but no matter: On to that Umpqua Dairy ice cream cone!

I queried my fellow staff members for

Alpha-Bit's marionberry-peach pie



CHUCK ADAMS

recommendations beyond my shortlist. One staffer mentioned the **Gingerbread Village** in between Eugene and Florence as a good bet for gingerbread and ice cream. Another named the **Green Salmon Coffee Shop** in Yachats ("great pastries, awesome drinks, super sandwiches ... a lot of community spirit") while other staffers offered "that chowder place" in Mapleton and the **Stockade** up near Nimrod (long since torn down).

But there was one day-trip café that made everybody's list: **Alpha-Bit** in Mapleton. They raved about the coffee, the tuna salad sandwich and the smoothies. But mostly, they talked about the pie. Being a pie lover, I hit the road and turned my whole theory for this article on its head: The food would be my destination. Anything that happened between here and there would be "on the way."

So I pulled into Mapleton in the early afternoon of the Country Fair weekend and found Alpha-Bit to be somewhat deserted. It seems the rush at day-trip cafés is in the early morning (for those in search of a caffeine fix) or late evening (when dusk forces a mass retreat from recreation). Nevertheless, at Alpha-Bit I felt welcome, as any stranger should. I knew exactly what I wanted: a slice of marionberry-peach pie with a scoop of Prince Pückler's vanilla ice cream and a cup of Allann Bros. coffee, a special brew roasted just for Alpha-Bit.

I glanced at their menu briefly, read their manifesto on their "intentional community" and noticed they spelled falafel "felafel." Eccentric characters entered, apologized for coming through the back door, said hello, then left. The talk among the two employee-owners dwelled on gambling. For communal, no-frills people, they sure had an interest in scratch-its, Megabucks and other lotteries.

Then the pie came. A thick slice, reheated in the oven, with a nice big scoop of ice cream. They used honey instead of sugar in the crust, which gave it a not-too-sweet but savory appeal. The pie, along with the dollar coffee (with as much cream as I liked), formed the perfectly mellow afternoon comfort food that any day tripper needs.

Of course, the health of independently owned roadside eateries depends on the choices we make from behind the wheel or handlebars of our vehicle. Sometimes we can't have it our way all the time. Sometimes it's possible beauty can be a snotty waitress with a stick up her ass. ❖



CURTIS PERRY

Myra (front) and Maira Bell of Burrito Girl



DEANNA UUTELA

Burrito Brilliance

Recently a reader sent in a letter to the editor raving about a burrito stand that he claimed had the "best burritos in town." It was an enticing enough claim that I had to check it out for myself. Burrito Girl, which bears no relation to the other well-known burrito joints of a similar name, is a little stand located near the end of West 11th. The owner, Maira Bell, sits patiently inside, ready to whip up one of her original creations and turn you into a regular customer.

Bell, originally from El Salvador, created Burrito Girl in 2002 with nothing but a dream and her own savings. "I didn't know anything about running a business, but my kids have always told me how much they loved my food, so I gave it a shot," Bell says. Her youngest child, Myra, 12, the real "burrito girl" for whom the establishment is named, sits beside her mother, greeting customers and taking orders.

When I told Bell about the admirer who inspired me to check out her business, she smiled and didn't seem too surprised. "I have very loyal customers that have been with me from the beginning," she says. Since its opening five years ago, Burrito Girl has switched locations several times, and Bell says she is still trying to find the right spot that will bring in the most customers.

While I was there, at least four of Bell's regulars stopped by on their lunch break, every one of them knowing exactly what they wanted. The most popular item is the carne asada burrito. From the first bite, there is something about the burrito that is just different from anything I've ever tasted. The tightly wrapped con-

coction is packed with grilled steak, Spanish rice, onion, cilantro and a hot sauce with an authenticity and spice like nothing else.

Bell says customers have joked with her many times about what she puts in her burritos that makes them keep coming back. I think it is the six different spices she uses to marinate the meat, the subtle seasoning in the moist rice or the homemade sauce (made with Japanese hot peppers) that creates a tangy, crisp fire in your mouth.

Burrito Girl offers food for any time of the day: breakfast burritos until 10 am, quesadillas filled with chicken and other goodies, a huge taco plate with three large tacos, vegetarian dishes and burritos galore. It seems too good to be true, but everything is \$5 or less and is served within minutes. Bell says that all she asks is that people try her food at least once; she's confident they will come back after that. She made a regular out of me.

Burrito Girl is well worth the drive out to 4419 Commerce St. (Space Age gas station's parking lot). — Deanna Uutela

Baking Edgy Brownies

I've been fascinated with the Edge Brownie Pan for months. I can't remember where I first saw it - doubtless it was online somewhere - but I was downright entranced. It's a simple yet brilliant idea: a baking pan shaped somewhat like a little maze that gives each piece of a baked dish at least two edges. Chewy bits! Nothing but chewy bits! What more could you want?

It didn't occur to me until recently, though, that I ought to a) try the damn thing and then b) spread the word so that other chewy-bits lovers might learn of this magical invention and get their own. So I procured a pan, and I set to cooking.

I'd like to be cooking still, but a deadline looms. The pan itself is heavy, solid, and blessed with a pair of easy-to-grip handles; there's no accidentally dipping your oven mitt in the batter here. My first experiment, I admit, didn't go so well, but it was no fault of the pan's. I baked a spinach-tomato-sausage pasta that, while absolutely scrumptious, was too moist a dish to make proper use of the Edge pan's many, many sides. What crisped up did a right fine job of crisping up, but it was a bit of a lesson: Filling the pan's narrow spaces isn't as easy as dumping your pile of pasta into a

9" x 13" rectangle, so if you're not going to get crispy bits from a particular recipe (such as one with fresh spinach), you might as well pass.

But then I made brownies. I used the recipe that comes with the pan (a tiny spatula, just the right size for the pan's rows, comes with it as well), which turned out to be wonderful: rich, moist in the middle, thick with chocolate chips. The deliciousness of your brownies will, of course, be in direct proportion to the quality of your ingredients, but regardless of whether you use Baker's chocolate or some fancier kind, you'll get the edges you're after. Sliced into 2" pieces (the pan's shape also makes cutting pieces an, um, piece of cake), my brownies were decadent, perfectly chewy on their numerous edges and perfectly soft in the middle. Even cold from the refrigerator, they're little slices of chocolate utopia.

What of pasta, though? I made up for the early misstep with a slightly ridiculous homemade macaroni and cheese the next night (sustenance for the last 200 pages of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*). Three kinds of cheese, two stirred into a roughly-estimated béchamel, went into the thing along with a pound of macaroni (I forgot the sliced olives, but I highly recommend them). We baked the dish until it bubbled

noisily, then ran it under the broiler for a few minutes to get the top nice and brown.

I burned my tongue on the liquid cheese, I was so impatient to eat it. The Edge pan is almost unbelievably non-stick, which is to say nothing sticks to it. Nothing. But the cheese sauce along the bottom and sides of the pasta formed a crust almost, though not quite, as chewy as that on the top. The ratio of stuck-together, chewy outside bits to soft

inside bits was something out of a dream.

It's a winner. The only drawbacks are tiny: One, it's kind of a pain to wash this pan, especially if you have a small sink; you may find water splashing everywhere. Two: You may also find yourself unable to resist seconds. And possibly thirds. For more about the Edge Brownie Pan (there'll be a lasagna-sized pan soon!), go to www.bakersedge.com — Molly Templeton

