



Minicon 34 Restaurant Guide

**Karen Cooper and
Bruce Schneier**

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 Sidewalk and 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.

Sidewalk

- Q Quality Rating (1–5)
- S Price Rating (1–5) Multiply number by \$5 for average price of a main course.

Zagat's

- 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

- P Price Rating

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

Bruce and Karen

- 24 Open 24 hours
- 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
- R Romantic
- RE Reservations Essential
- RL Reservations Recommended for Large Parties
- RR Reservations Recommended
- SA Skyway Accessible
- SF Smoke Free
- SS Sit with Strangers
- TO Take Out
- TOO Take Out Only
- VG Video Games
- VP Valet Parking
- W Waterfront



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A Rune Press Publication

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Welcome to the Minicon 34 Restaurant Guide

The Twin Cities has a really good restaurant scene. While we don't have the world-class high-end establishments that big cities have, we've got a mix 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 original influx 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 making dinner. All the major (and a lot of minor) cuisines can be found around here, from Khan's Mongolian Bar-B-Que to the South American specialties of El Meson. 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 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 and fatty but mostly harmless diet many of us grew up on. And it's an adventure. One local Vietnamese place even used to advertise, "I didn't come 9,000 miles to cook you ordinary food." And we don't brave the Minnesota weather to eat ordinary food.

When we took the job of writing the Minicon restaurant guide, we had grandiose plans of writing the ideal Twin Cities restaurant guide, good for Minicon 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 Minicon; it includes most restaurants in the downtown area as well as many of our local favorites. Thousands of restaurants, including almost anything in St. Paul, are not listed. We just didn't have time to review them.

Our hope, in doing 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 a couple of new places to try.

Who We Are

We're Karen Cooper and Bruce Schneier. We're long-time Minneapolis fans and amateur restaurant patrons. We're literate, opinionated, and (most of all) we volunteered for this job. 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.

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 reviews 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 each restaurant at most once, and some we didn't visit 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 freight train. We have recorded 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 Minicon deadlines wait for no one, and in the end we just had to manage. So we stole other people's reviews: the Sidewalk Web site, Zagat's, and elsewhere. Honestly, we did the best we could.

What We Reviewed

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

We don't actually expect everyone to spend lots of money on expensive meals all weekend. We don't expect many people will. When we were given 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., Mi Trieu Chau, Me Gusta).
3. Special-occasion restaurants (e.g., Goodfellows, Aquavit).
4. Distant restaurants we were going to anyway (Lincoln Del).

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. We drew them all in—the fast food restaurants, too—on the map. Our job ends there.

We figured that if we were going to go over the top, we might as well do it talking about restaurants that deserve reviewing.

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 fan who reviews restaurants professionally in Chicago (Leah Zeldes Smith, who's planning to attend Minicon this year). One of the things she told us is that restaurants lie. The information they give out is often wrong. Hours change, menus change, cooks leave and are hired elsewhere. Rarely are reviews 100% accurate. We tried our best, but please keep this in mind. There are mistakes in the data.

We've done our best to compensate 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. There's data.

If we had to give you one piece of advice, it is this: *call before going*. We purposely left out opening and closing hours, since Minicon is on a holiday weekend and Easter hours have not, at press time, been established for many restaurants we discuss. Too, we hope our restaurant guide will be useful long past Minicon, and the information might be different on the average weekend. So call. Make a reservation if you can, so you don't have to stand around waiting for a table. Check that they're actually open and serving food. It's easy.

And conversely, if you made a reservation and then change your mind, please call to cancel. All the other fans standing around the restaurant lobby staring at the empty table that is being saved for you will thank you.

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 broader range of restaurants in walking distance, or easy travel distance, than we could have dreamed of at our previous hotel; this is the benefit of being downtown. Those of us who have eaten nine consecutive meals in Kaffe Stuga every Easter weekend for the last ten years will have a tough time deciding where to go.

The Minneapolis Hilton is quite near Nicollet Avenue, the best concentration of interesting restaurants for hundreds of miles in any direction. It's near the Warehouse District, which is another area with a wide range of good choices for dinner out. It's close to 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, and is open during much of the convention. You'll be able to range from the hotel in coatless, indoor 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 well-signed and there are maps, including the Minicon 34 Restaurant Pocket Guide. 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.

When Are We

Downtown means office buildings. Office buildings mean office workers. Office workers go home on Friday at 5:00 PM. And most of the restaurants that cater to them close until Monday. To make matters worse, Minicon is on Easter weekend. Restaurants that stay open on a normal weekend might close this weekend. You'll find most of the skyways look like a ghost town on the weekend; they're still open but there's hardly anybody in them and many, many businesses are closed. People congregate in the areas around and between the department stores and malls: Dayton's, Gaviidae Common, City Center, and the Crystal Court.

Things aren't as bleak as all that. Some fast food restaurants claim to be open at least through Saturday. The two hotel restaurants—the good one (that isn't so good) and the cheap one (that isn't so cheap)—will be open, and other hotel restaurants will be open all weekend as well. Nicollet Mall is just a couple of blocks away, and restaurants there will be open all weekend. And taxis can quickly whisk you away to restaurants staffed by people who don't even celebrate Easter, and barely celebrate the weekend. But call ahead to make sure.

Is It Worth It?

by Leah Zeldes Smith

A number of years ago, when I interviewed for the position of restaurant critic at Chicago's Lerner newspaper chain, the then editor asked, "If you went to two restaurants, and were served the identical meal, but at one place it cost \$15, and at the other it cost \$55, would you rate them the same?"

I got the job, so she must have been satisfied with my answer. The answer I gave, and one I believe any critic worth his or her salt would give, was "It depends...."

I thought of this recently in the ladies' room at Le Titi de Paris, a very nice French restaurant in Arlington Heights, a northwest suburb of Chicago. As Karen Cooper and I dried our hands, she remarked, "For \$20 more a plate, we would have had cloth towels."

If everything were identical, I would never rate a higher-priced restaurant more highly than a lower-priced one. But there's more to a dining experience than food alone, and what makes one restaurant more expensive than another often has little to do with the quality of food in each. A lot has to do with real estate and amenities and service.

How this translates into a given critic's rating varies from publication to publication. Some evaluate each restaurant according to its own merits, awarding stars according to how well the restaurant lives up to what it's trying to be. Thus an ethnic storefront can achieve as many points as the most elegant and expensive of dining rooms. Others have an overall standard that applies to all, leading to lists such as Mobil's Five-Diamond restaurants, which include only high-end establishments serving French or American food.

Lerner's reviews have not, in fact, included a rating scale. My personal inclination, however, is to judge based on individual merits, with a high emphasis on food, followed by service, and then décor. Over that is a factor I call *comfort*.

I thoroughly enjoyed my last dinner at the lovely Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton Chicago, where Chef Sarah Stegner's exquisite *cuisine nouvelle* was presented on the finest china by a bevy of attentive servers. But I also loved the smoked pork shoulder handed to me on a paper plate across the counter at Box's, a seedy barbecue joint with six tables in an indifferent neighborhood in Rockford, Ill. The first meal, with accompanying fine wines, cost about \$100. The second, with a can of Coke I served myself from the pop machine in the corner, ran less than \$10. I would recommend both highly, depending on what kind of experience you're in the mood for.

Then there is Blackbird, a fashionable restaurant in the hot new Randolph Street Market district. Its new American fare is cutting edge, brilliantly executed. But the tables are 4 inches apart, the chairs are unyielding, and the unrelieved hard surfaces of the small dining room help to create an awful din. Despite its good food, Blackbird is one of the least pleasant dining experiences in Chicago. It flunks the comfort test.

On the other hand, there's Le Colonial. Le Colonial is a beautiful Vietnamese restaurant on Chicago's trendy and tourist-laden Rush Street. Its romantic décor features wicker furniture and leafy plants that make you feel like you're dining at the height of French colonialism. The food is fine, and presented nicely, but it's no tastier than that at my favorite storefront Vietnamese restaurant, Nam Viet in lively Edison Park, and the service is much less friendly. Le Colonial offers many of the same dishes as Nam Viet, or any of a half dozen places in New Chinatown (around Broadway Avenue and Argyle Street in the somewhat chancy Uptown neighborhood), though its menu is more limited. Yet it costs three times as much—more if you count the high price of parking on Rush Street.

I don't recommend Le Colonial, although I've enjoyed my meals there. The amenities it offers don't seem worth its inflated prices. I do, however, recommend a similarly decorated and equally expensive Vietnamese restaurant, Pasteur, even though it's outrageously noisy and in a considerably less tony neighborhood, because the food there is really special.

So what makes an expensive restaurant worth it? First of all the food is absolutely fresh, prepared to order from scratch, using the best ingredients. The artistry of the chef can be an important factor; restaurant fare isn't home cooking. A good *demi-glace*—just one ingredient of a sauce—can take up to three days to make. One element of a dish can require more than a dozen ingredients and twice that many steps to assemble. But the cooking can also be simple; in that case, the raw materials must be of the absolutely highest quality: prime, aged meats; the freshest seafood; pristine and exotic vegetables.

The rarity of the ingredients also contributes. Wild mushrooms, baby lettuces, Asian greens, fresh herbs, imported caviar, perfect raspberries... none of these come cheap. In the Midwest, fresh seafood will always come at a premium, because it all must be shipped in by air. Highly perishable *foie gras* runs about \$80 a pound. Truffles can cost that for an ounce. The better the restaurant, the more luxury ingredients it will use.

Presentation is also a factor. In a moderately priced restaurant, the chef may garnish a plate with a piece of parsley. But in a costly one, each food item will be arranged just so—maybe stacked in a tower, maybe spread in a fan—and any sauce will be applied with precision. The garnishes will be displayed so that the plate appeals as much to the eye as to the palate. That kind of presentation comes at a price—it takes extra work and extra chefs and a bigger and more elaborate kitchen to accomplish. A diner might employ no more than two short-order cooks to cater to the dinner crowd; a fine-dining restaurant may have as many as a dozen chefs to feed the same number of patrons, not counting the prep cooks who came in early to peel onions and carve vegetables for garnishes.

Appearance also matters when it comes to the dining room. Who wants to pay high prices to eat in a dive? A costly restaurant should look expensive. The dining room should be attractive. It should have nice china, heavy cutlery, fine glassware, cloth covering the tables and for the napkins. All of these contribute to your dinner check and increase the comfort level to one of luxury. The price goes up if the flowers are real and the artwork important. And Karen is right; a top-of-the-line establishment will provide cloth towels in the restrooms, increasing its laundry costs and the price of your dinner accordingly.

It goes without saying that the dining room must be arranged comfortably. The tables won't be too close together. At premium prices you don't want to feel like you're dining with strangers. Chairs will be comfortable. If cigarette smoke is allowed it will be well confined or ventilated. Noise will be regulated—lively enough to be fun, perhaps, but muted enough that you can converse with your tablemates without straining to be heard. The physical demands involved in creating such a pleasant space can be expensive, and that cost will be reflected in your dinner check, along with the proprietor's other major expense: the rent.

As the realtors' saying goes, another thing that contributes to price is location, location, location.

All other things being equal, dinner in a nice, central neighborhood will cost more than dinner in a run-down area or inconvenient location; downtown will usually cost more than the suburbs, simply because the rents are high. Does it matter to you, as a diner, once you're inside? Maybe, maybe not. That's why out-of-the-way eateries can be tremendous bargains. Zealous, a restaurant in far-flung Elmhurst, Ill., run by a protégé of the famous chef Charlie Trotter, just announced that this summer it will relocate to a downtown Chicago location. I'm betting the prices go up at least by half.

But probably the thing that most contributes to cost and comfort level is service. It's not uncommon for a fine restaurant to have four servers for every diner. Good service is worth paying for. At top restaurants you rarely have to ask for anything; your needs are anticipated. Silverware appears when it is needed, fresh at every course. Your water glass is always full. Your plate is removed, silently, once everyone at your table has finished with the course—and not before. Waiters don't interrupt your conversation every 10 minutes to ask, "Is everything OK?"—they just make certain it is OK. And should you require anything, a lifted eyebrow brings an attentive server to your side. The staff is pleasant and friendly, but not so friendly as to be intrusive.

The service actually begins before you get to the restaurant, with your reservation. Restaurants that lose reservations lose customers. At the finest places, you never have to cool your heels in the bar. Your table will be waiting when you arrive; if it's not, apologies will be abject. Good service is also personal. The maître d' will call you by name. The best ones recognize their repeat customers, even those who don't visit often. Regular customers may be honored by a visit from the chef.

In top restaurants, everyone who works there is well-trained and knowledgeable. The waitstaff has sampled the fare and is prepared to answer questions about it. The sommelier knows what wines go well with the menu and will counsel you according to your tastes and what he or she thinks you want to spend, rather than what costs the most. Should you want something not on the menu, the kitchen will try to produce it.

Above all, each and every staff member will strive to impress you that your pleasure is paramount. And that, of course, is the most worthwhile luxury of all.

Restaurants mentioned:

Blackbird, 312/715-0708, 619 W. Randolph St., Chicago
Box's Bar-B-Q, 815/962-9629, 815 Marchesano Drive, Rockford

Le Colonial, 312/255-0088, 937 N. Rush St., Chicago
The Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton Chicago, 312/573-5222, 160 E.
Pearson St., Chicago
Nam Viet, 773/763-0307, 6731 N. Northwest Highway, Chicago
Pasteur, 773/878-1061, 5525 N. Broadway Ave., Chicago
Le Titi de Paris, 847/506-0222, 1015 W. Dundee Road, Arlington Heights
Zealous, 630/834-9300, 174 N. York Road, Elmhurst

Four Food Groups

When we were kids, the government told us we should eat a selection of foods from the “Four Basic Food Groups” so that we would have a balanced diet and be healthy. Our teachers in health class even quizzed us as to what those four food groups were. They too wanted us to have a balanced diet and be healthy.

All that went out the window with fandom. Fans do not, in their native environment, eat a balanced diet. Look around the average consuite. Potato chips are clearly a staple; so is pop. We might find some fruits or veggies in the form of a tray of limp celery and carrots, or a bowl of oranges people have to have preternatural encouragement to eat, but it’s basically a grease and sugar diet.

Fans exist to examine their world, and the eating habits of fans in the wild has not escaped this inspection. Fans revel in their unique differences from mundane acquaintances, and so have established their own fannish spin, or several spins, on just what those Four Food Groups are:

Caffeine, chocolate, chips, and sex—Alison Hopkins

Chocolate, fat, salt, and pasta—Gary Farber

Sugar, salt, fat, and anything by Hostess—Beth Friedman

Fat, salt, sugar, and chocolate. If male, substitute beer for chocolate—Doug Wickstrom

Sugar, salt, fat, and caffeine—Dorothy J. Heydt

Sugar, salt, starch, and grease—Bruce can’t remember who

Spam, ramen, pizza, and Doritos—Brenda Daverin

Starch, salt, caffeine, and fat—Ed Dravecky III

Beer, chocolate, fat, and hot peppers—Pierre Jelenc

Sugar, starch, grease, and preservatives; but according to my son Paul, it’s meat, dairy, pareve, and non-kosher—Dave Weingart

Junk, fast, frozen, and spoiled—John Ladwig

Salt, fat, sugar, and dead things—Alter S. Reiss. He also reminds us that Dr. Nick Riviera advised paying attention to the neglected food groups: the whipped group, and the congealed group, for starters.

Given the plethora of answers to the question, it’s impossible that we not find an equally wide range of answers to “What is the World’s Most Perfect Food?”

Ed Dravecky III: “Someday, some lucky person will invent a food with all four of these properties and make their fortune. Perhaps some sort of cola-flavored potato chip or a chocolate milkshake with oyster crackers? (Obviously, the idea needs some refinement.)”

Adds Dorothy J. Heydt: “A rich chocolate cake would do, since theobromine is close enough to caffeine.

Cally Soukup realizes “It’s been invented. Chocolate covered pretzels. Truly one of the world’s perfect foods,” while Ulrika O’Brien suggests “deep-fried Mars bars. With Marmite dipping sauce.”

Karen often said “Irish coffee is the most perfect food, because it contains the four food groups: sugar, fat, caffeine, and alcohol.” We don’t know who this should be originally attributed to, but it was her own interpretation for several years, until she decided that Irish Coffee is a Beverage, not a Food. From Norway, B. Vermo commented, “Alas, so did the authorities here. Before that, restaurants with no liquor license defined it as a dessert.”

The default answer in Minn-stf, reported back to us by about every second person we asked, was: “Peanut M&Ms are the perfect food, because they contain the four food groups: protein, chocolate, color, and charm.” Originally said by Sharon Kahn, she fears this might be her legacy on this earth. Eileen Lufkin adds that they also have spin, and may even have strangeness.

And the brain trust on rec.arts.sf.fandom, including Ray Radlein, Pierre Jelenc, Gary Farber, Beth Friedman, Richard Brandt, Ulrika O’Brien, and Morris M. Keesan, concluded that there are many more than just four food groups. They listed The Raspberries, the Banana Splits, Tangerine Dream, Cake, Sugar, The Poptarts, The Jam, The Sugarcubes, The Cucumbers, Angry Salad, Eels, Kenny Young and the Eggplants, Lovepie, The Papaya Kings, The Figgs (so they can’t spell...), Rachael Sage, Soup, The Cranberries, Strawberry Alarm Clock, Rachel Sweet, The 1910 Fruit Gum Co., Ice T, Cream, Squirrel Nut Zippers, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Lovin’ Spoonful, Fiona Apple, Vanilla Fudge, The Electric Prunes, Moby Grape, and Lutefisk, before the thread mutated to who-knows-what.

Recently, the U.S. government spent more money than prudent on the more detailed “Food Pyramid,” in deference to the fact that the ancient Egyptians ate food, too. The idea was that the foods on the bottom of the pyramid were the boring ones you were supposed to eat a lot of, and the foods on top of the pyramid were the good ones you were supposed to eat sparingly. There was some last-minute political wrangling when the meat industry objected to its place on top of the pyramid as the least-healthy food group. A compromise was reached, and they were bumped one level down to hide among the fish, beans, and nuts, and they added a new “poisons” food group, which was on top. (Okay, that’s a lie. The “fats, oils, and sweets” group is on top. Below them are two groups: “milk, yogurt, cheese” and “meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs, nuts.” Below them are “vegetables” and “fruits.” And on the bottom, the food group that according to the FDA you’re supposed to gorge on, is “bread, cereal, rice, pasta.”) M&Ms are nowhere to be found, but presumably they can serve as UFOs that land on the new food pyramid to transport the faithful to their home world.

Everyone agrees that this new food pyramid is completely useless as a menu planner or dietary aid, but the possibilities seem endless for the fannish food pyramid. We suggest this as a programming item for next year.

How to Tip

Tipping 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 minimum wage 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 fans 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. It is how the waiter or waitress (and in some restaurants, the bus people and the bartenders) get 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, supports those ridiculous Internet stock valuations and bolsters 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 15% tip onto the check. Look for it, so you don't inadvertently tip twice.

Stiffing the waitress is a big deal, and should only be 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 asked for a item (sugar, ketchup, napkins, coffee, etc.), never brings it; a server who appears to forget your existence (takes the order of another table in his section that was seated after yours while you wait to order, or delivers your meal and never checks back to ensure that everything is to your liking); 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. We'll warn you when it happens.

Getting Around

The Hilton is in the middle of downtown Minneapolis. Well, more accurately, it's near the southwest end of downtown Minneapolis. This year, Minicon is smack in the middle of the business district. What this means in these pages is that many of the restaurants within walking distance will close Friday afternoon and not open again until Monday. There are exceptions, but many of you are going to have to get into a motorized vehicle in order to eat. If you don't want to lose your parking place, try these options.

Taxis

We think grabbing a cab 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. Our test cab from the hotel to the West Bank cost \$5. And most downtown destinations will be cheaper. Take \$5 both ways, divide by four diners and that's \$2.50 a person (\$3.33 if you can't squeeze three in the back seat).

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:

Blue & White: 333-3333 or 333-3331
Yellow Cab: 824-4444 or 824-4000
Rainbow Cab: 332-1615
Green & White: 349-9999
Red & White: 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) now 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. It's important to know that Easter holiday bus hours will be in effect on Sunday.

Getting back: 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>.

Buses to Uptown

#6 and #12 both go to the Uptown area. Catch either on Hennepin Ave. in the direction against traffic.

#17 also goes to Uptown via Nicollet Ave. and 24th St. You can catch it along Nicollet Mall.

Buses down Nicollet Ave.

#18 will take you to any of the good restaurants on Nicollet Ave. You catch it on the Nicollet Mall. You also take the #17 from there, and it will take you down Nicollet Ave. as far south as 24th.

Buses to Nordeast

#1 or #4 will take you to Nordeast. Catch either bus along Hennepin, in the direction of traffic.

Buses to the West Bank

The #7 or the #20 bus takes you to the West Bank, and #7 continues down to the big warehouse grocery stores on Lake Street. Catch either along 5th Ave., northeast of 6th St.

The #16 bus takes you to the West Bank, and continues to Stadium Village. Catch it on 4th St. at Nicollet Ave.

Buses along Lake Street

The #21 bus runs along Lake Street. Catch it at most corners.

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, though this will not hold true on Easter Sunday

Shopping for a Room Party: “You Have to have M&Ms”

The most important thing to remember about shopping for a room party is that it's Easter weekend and everything's closed on Sunday. The next most important thing to remember is that the liquor stores (the only places to buy beer, wine, or the hard stuff in Minnesota) close at 8:00 PM Monday through Thursday, and 10:00 PM on Friday and Saturday nights.

That said, here's where to shop:

Haskell's: The nearest liquor store to the Hilton, with an especially nice wine selection. They'll deliver, too. 333-2434. 81 S. 9th St., Minneapolis.

Surdyk's: A big place, and the only store in town that carried pisco when we went out looking for it. They've also got a nice deli attached, with a *very* good cheese counter. Ask to sample everything; we do. And they claim to have the largest walk-in cigar humidor in the upper Midwest. 379-3232. Corner of East Hennepin and University Ave.

Rainbow Foods: This is one of the two chains of warehouse-style grocery stores in the Twin Cities. Beware: you'll have to bag your own groceries. There

are two Rainbows on Lake St., and we think the East Lake location is a nicer store, especially so in the produce department and the deli. It also has a Cub Foods across the street, sharing a parking lot with Target. They'll close at midnight on Saturday, and reopen Monday morning at 6 AM, but are otherwise open 24/7. 724-4605. 2919 26th Ave. S. The Uptown location, which you might want to check out while stopping at Lund's, is at 1104 Lagoon Ave. 823-1563.

Cub: The other of the warehouse grocery stores, also keeping holiday hours for Easter but otherwise open 24/7. 2850 26th Ave. 721-2787.

Byerly's: A local chain of the upscale phyla, with more exotic and imported foods, more organic stuff, not-very-good takeout sushi, and slightly higher prices on everything. They bag your groceries for you, and load them into your car. Except for the Easter holiday, they'll be open 24/7. Byerly's has several locations, none convenient to Hilton. This one is arguably easiest to get to: 3777 Park Center Blvd., St. Louis Park. (Yup, the same one we all used to go to from the old hotel.) 929-2100.

Lund's: A good grocery store not dissimilar to Byerly's (which chain Lund's recently bought). The Uptown Lund's at Lake and Hennepin has recently become the premier place in the Twin Cities to buy cheese. Surdyk's and Dayton's Marketplace, especially the downtown store, have good cheese counters, but Lund's has gone one better. They hired Patrick Moore from the Dayton's Marketplace deli and have given him free rein to buy what he wants. He doesn't go overboard—this is still Minneapolis, after all—but he has more interesting cheeses than we've seen anywhere else in the city. Now if they will only let him branch into olives.

This is the easiest Lund's to reach from the convention hotel, and is one of the best upmarket groceries in town. They're open 24/7, except of course for the Easter holiday. 1450 W. Lake St. 825-2440.

“Kwik-E-Marts”: There are various SuperAmericas and similar places with small grocery departments that will stay open throughout the weekend. Arguably the best choice of this sorry lot is the Walgreen's on Nicollet and 65th, which never closes, and whose reputation was secured by Terry Garey's shopping trip there during a Minicon a couple of years back.

Dry ice can be gotten from several places listed in the Yellow Pages, including Big Bell Ice Cream, Inc., which is close to the Rainbow and Cub on East Lake Street. 729-5205. 3218 Snelling Ave., Minneapolis.

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. If you like deep dish pizza, Edwardo's delivers, too.

Dulono's Pizza: 827-1726

Edwardo's: 339-2736

Pizza Luce: 333-7359

Uptown Pizza: 823-7203

The particular Hilton concierge we talked to said that Uptown Pizza was his favorite. Karen votes for Dulono's. Bruce grudgingly picks Edwardo's. 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 Gourmet Express that's basically a taxi company for food. They publish a book of 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 (not the grocery store), Myconos, 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 convention, it's an option. Copies of the current book of menus are available at the hotel concierge desk.

For the Novice: How to Order Wine

We don't have the space to write this properly. There's too much to say. We can't teach you how to recognize a good wine from an average one, or a bargain from something overpriced. We can't teach you the complexities of wine labels, the intricacies of the color, odor, or taste. We can't even teach the different varietals. It's just too complicated. (One example: we own a 1000-page book on Bordeaux, which is just one type of wine from one region in France. We have found ourselves annoyed by the things the book does not discuss.) What we can do, though, is give you some tips on ordering wine.

The bare bones basics: There are two kinds of wine. There's red and white. Sparkling wine might be champagne, but only when from the French region of Champagne, and only there are they drunk with a meal. There are also blush wines, but no one orders those (even in the region they're grown).

It used to be that people drank red wine with red meat and white wine with chicken or fish, and that was a simple, easy-to-follow rule. Nowadays, the rule is to match the food to the wine. Strong, flavorful food wants to go with strong wine, whereas delicate dishes should be enjoyed with lighter wines.

Tip #1: Wine can be expensive. Restaurants make most of their money from the bar tab, so restaurant wine often costs two to three times more than the same wine in a liquor store. (The one Minneapolis exception we've found is The Local, which has a really nice wine list at what seem to be retail prices.) You don't order wine in a restaurant because it's so cheap, you have wine with dinner because the combination makes a good meal better.

Tip #2: In most restaurants, the waiter may not know much more than you do. He'll know general rules: that a Cabernet will overpower the delicate flavor of your filet of sole and that a Riesling won't stand up to your venison steak, but he isn't nearly as authoritative as he might pretend to be. High-end restaurants are exceptions to this; they have sommeliers (wine stewards) on staff whose job it is to know the wine list and to help patrons make recommendations. (If you know wine, the pre-dinner conversation with the sommelier can be one of the most enjoyable parts of a good meal.) Twin Cities restaurants don't have such expertise on staff; not even at Goodfellow's.

Tip #3: While it's always best to pair the wine with the food, it's impossible to do if everyone at the table is ordering something different. The following puzzle is a hard one: "I'm ordering the steak, he's ordering the fish, she's only having a salad, and he's getting the chicken. What kind of wine would you recommend?" Order wine by the glass. The wine won't be the best the house has to offer and it won't be the cheapest. But everyone can get what they like.

Tip #4: You're on a date, and you want to look like a bit of a pro when ordering wine. You also don't want the waiter to suggest a bottle of wine you can't afford. Here's the secret technique for communicating to your waiter how much you want to spend on wine. Look at the wine list authoritatively, point to something in the price range you're hoping for, and say something like: "Do you think this wine will nicely complement what we're having?" The waiter will immediately recognize that you don't know what you're talking about, but will refrain from making you look bad in front of your date. Instead, he will point to another wine that is more suited to your meal (see, however, tips 2 and 3), and suggest that instead. The trick here is that the suggestion he will make will be about the same price as your original bottle. Works every time.

Tip #5: If you care enough to drink the very best, bring your own bottle. Restaurants charge corkage fees, which is literally the amount they charge to pull the cork out of the bottle. It's really their requirement that you not be able to get around their wine markups. But even at \$10 for corkage (\$15 at the Oceanaire), plus the cost of the bottle, it's a better deal than most wine lists.

Tip #6: You know there is no tip #6.

Tip #7: Temperature. Reds at room temperature and whites on ice, right? Not exactly. Almost all restaurants serve wines at the wrong temperatures; they serve the reds too warm and the whites too cold. Reds are supposed to be served at "room" temperature, but the room at issue is the wine cellar; think 55 degrees instead of 68 degrees. And whites should be a bit colder: something like 50 degrees. If you want to really annoy a restaurant and impress your

friends, start making a big deal about this. If you want to annoy your friends, continue to make a big deal about this.

Tip #8: Age. Wine gets better with age, and then eventually it gets worse. Sometimes after it gets better, it gets worse for a while. Sometimes it just gets different. Different wines age at different rates. Different years age at different rates. And depending on storage, different bottles age at different rates. Wine books go on about this endlessly, but one question we haven't seen addressed is: "Why do people drink wine from the 1990s so quickly, when wine from the 1980s is only barely ready to drink?" The answer is simple: the vineyards are doing it on purpose. Over the past decade or so, winemakers have been modifying their recipes so that their wines are ready to drink sooner. Most California wines are ready after a year or so. Even the newer vintage French wines are being created to be drinkable sooner. The market is no longer willing to wait ten years to drink a bottle of wine bought today.

Tip #9: France vs. California? This is a tough one. The best California wines are just as good as the best French wines. The problem is the dizzying array of California wines, and it's harder to know what's good and what's mediocre. The French have been classifying wines for hundreds of years. Different types of wines grow in different regions. The different chateaux are rated according to quality. According to law, every grape that goes into a vineyard's wine must come from that vineyard. California is more complicated. Napa Valley is a region of microclimates; two identical wines growing 100 yards away can taste very different. In France, those two wines would have different names. In Napa, they're just Napa. And vineyards can buy grapes from other vineyards. Sure, there will be the two dozen or so California growers that people have heard of and will recognize off a wine list, but you have to know a lot more to order California wines well. So, France if you want to impress people who are easy to impress, good California if you want to impress people who are hard to impress. And don't forget the rest of the world. There are excellent wines from Italy, Spain, Hungary, Australia, Washington State, Oregon, and lots of other regions.

Tip #10: If you want to learn about wines, the cheapest way is to find a nearby liquor store with a staff who knows wines, and get their advice. Taste a lot of different wines, and keep notes on what you like and what you don't. Read books. And don't be intimidated by the snob culture of wine.

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 rectangular 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 noticed 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.

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 the 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 a new restaurant: 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 (both vegetarian or 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.

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
337-0262

Ethiopian
NR, L, D,

Red Sea

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

East African Sidewalk: P-2
TO, FB, L, D, LL, LLL, P, Da

Blue Nile

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

Ethiopian Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-20, S-14, F-18, P-\$11
RL, TO, FP, FB, L, D, Da, P, LM

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 on the bet that the more Scandinavian population would enjoy his cooking just as much if not more.

Zagat's is the premiere restaurant review guide for New York. Just about everyone who is serious about dining in that city owns a copy, and Zagat's ratings are more important than anything else in the fortunes of a top restaurant. Although they haven't caught on nearly as much, Zagat's has guides for about a dozen other cities and "best-of" guides for the entire country. Minneapolis has one (although the latest guide is from 1995, which means the reviews may be as much as a year older).

Unlike guides such as Michelin that employ legions of food critics to blanket Europe and eat at every restaurant they can find, Zagat's solicits ratings and comments from readers. This means that Zagat's ratings are based on the city's clientele. A two-star Michelin restaurant from the Switzerland book should be comparable to a two-star Michelin restaurant from the Denmark book, but a 27 food rating in New York might not be the same as a 27 food rating in Minneapolis. It's all relative.

The obvious thing to do would be to find some unbiased source of reviews—*Gourmet* magazine, for example—and to normalize the different Zagat's scales. While this works for the ultra-high end, the average restaurant (even the average good restaurant) doesn't make it into *Gourmet's* surveys.

So when Aquavit opened in Minneapolis, we were intrigued. The one in New York has an excellent reputation. Zagat's gives it a food rating of 25 (in fact, only 25 New York restaurants have higher ratings). If the one in Minneapolis is the same quality, then we have at least one data point by which to compare

Minneapolis and New York's Zagat's ratings. Not exactly the Rosetta stone, but useful nonetheless.

Minneapolis first: In company with Felicia Herman and Joel Rosenberg, we visited Aquavit. Let us 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-crusted 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. Felicia tried the lingonberry aquavit. We thought it was much too strong for our tastes and suppose that means it's the authentic stuff.

There is a vegetarian (not vegan) tasting menu, as well as a normal list of à la carte things 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 meal. If this restaurant is open the Saturday night of Minicon, this is where you'll find us.

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. But the real news is the recently unveiled \$19.99 three-course lunch and dinner, available through 1999. It's served only in the café, and the set menu of an appetizer, entrée, and dessert changes weekly. This is *the* meal deal in the Twin Cities.

What about the Aquavit in New York? We weren't able to visit it in time for this review. Ask us about it next year.

Aquavit

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

Scandinavian

Sidewalk: P-5
RE, PP, L, D, SF, SA

Bagels

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.

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. And, best of all for Minicon attendees, they claim that they will be open on Saturday and Sunday.

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
339-3311

Bagels

Sidewalk: P-1
TO, PP, B, L, D, SA, NCC

Barbecue

Many fans have a thing about ribs. Mike Glicksohn can't ever get enough of the Montgomery Inn (a.k.a. Ribs King). "Since being taken there two decades ago, I have never missed a trip to Ribs King, usually in the company of an enthusiastic group of fellow aficionados or eager rookies. And I have never had anything less than a superb meal there. I've tried ribs all over the country and nobody else comes close to Ribs King in the preparation of that style of ribs. I've even been accompanied by vegetarian friends who wanted to see for themselves the legendary enthusiasm and effusive praise that pours out of me (very loudly and very publicly) as I savor every delicious bite of every wondrous rack. Great food, great service and a marvelous décor/ambiance. No wonder I'm one of many who rate Ribs King one of North America's finest eating places!"

And Valli Hoski, longtime Chicago fan now living in Dallas on Tunnel BBQ: “Get the ribs; anything else is silly. Get the big slab, you’re only here once in a blue moon anyway. These are dry broasted beef ribs, not the dripping gooey kind. The tangy sauce is spicy without being hot: flavorful rather than numbing. Gnaw your way to heaven and back. Get extra napkins. Sometime during your grand chaw, give your taste buds a break and wander over to the pie display. Check out the Mile High Lemon Chiffon pie (trademarked undoubtedly). That’s why you get a takeout box for the rest of your ribs. Fine crunchy roasted ribs, crispy coleslaw, acceptable French fries. Topping it off is the exquisite lemon chiffon pie, with its smooth lemon base, subtle chiffon interlude, as high as a Texas large-hair day, graced by a fine, light meringue crown. Dinner just doesn’t get much finer than this.”

The most infamous fannish Tunnel trip was actually led by Valli Hoski and other not-at-this-time-remembered fans. As the story goes, a bunch of folks were sitting around early one day discussing plans of what to do and where to (eventually) eat dinner when Valli said “You know what I’d really like is Tunnel BBQ!” Shocked looks and appreciative agreements seemed about equal. Whereupon a whole carload of people drove for six hours straight, had themselves a mighty fine rack of ribs and drove six hours straight back.

Unfortunately, neither of those restaurants is anywhere near Minneapolis. Ribs King is in Cincinnati, and Tunnel BBQ is in Windsor, Ontario, just the other side of the tunnel from Detroit. Minneapolis isn’t St. Louis. It’s not Texas. It’s not even Chicago. It’s not known for its ribs.

What we do have is **Rudolph’s**, possibly the only ribs restaurant 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. Sunday brunch aficionado Beth Friedman reports their buffet to be one of the best in town.

Famous Dave’s BBQ & Blues Club 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, but Beth (a Chicago native), finds that it makes her a bit homesick. 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. "Second best," say the readers of *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine*.

Anyway, the ribs are okay at best. 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, 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 17 years she's lived in Minneapolis. We'll get there one day; really. Beth Friedman lives near there and thinks well of it. 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; she's never found a use for it, 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.

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

Rudolph's Barbecue

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

BBQ

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2

Zagat's: D-19, S-15, F-18, P-\$16
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
822-9900

BBQ

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-2

NR, TO, GE, PP, FB, L, D, LL, LLL,
LE, KF, GG, BA, MS

Market Bar-B-Que

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

BBQ

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-3

Zagat's: D-18, S-13, F-15, P-\$15
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
 721-2023

BBQ

Sidewalk: Q-1.5, P-2
 TO, L, D, NCC

Pickled Parrot

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

Caribbean, Southwestern, Ribs

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-3
Zagat's: D-18, S-18, F-18, P-\$16
 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
 823-4450

BBQ

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-1
 TO, DL, L, D, TOO, SF, NCC

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. 1998's TAFF winner, Maureen Kincaid Speller, happened to be in town.

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 are fine, such as it is. Probably the best thing at both tables was the portobello sandwich: good, but as trendily 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 1999 *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
332-3908

English, American

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-2
Zagat's: D-13, S-21, F-15, P-\$13
TO, PP, FB, L, D, LL, LLL, Da, P,
AT, OS

Buca

Buca is an institution; it's a family Italian restaurant with a couple of locations around the Twin Cities, 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

1204 Harmon Place, Minneapolis
Harmon Place & S 12th St
(651) 638-2225

Italian

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-2
Zagat's: D-20, S-21, F-21, P-\$16
FP, FB, D, GG

Byerly's

We went, all eight of us, to the **Byerly's** at West 36th Street and Highway 100. The thought of “eating at the grocery store” might seem a bit odd, but Byerly's isn't your traditional grocery store. You can get takeout sushi, fine Limoges porcelain, and wedding cakes. Although they took out the piano player years ago, the floors are still carpeted. And anyway, we had to buy groceries.

The restaurant has your typical diner-like décor, with booths, tables, and counter. The menu is traditional American diner food, with an extra dollop of Midwestern boring. Half of us had breakfast, the other half had lunch.

The breakfast folks decided that the French toast was adequate, the omelet was reasonable, but the ham was very salty. (Actually, it salted the entire omelet through proximity alone.) The lunch folks commented at the saltiness of the soups, both of them. As the nine-year-old said, “I'm surprised they didn't put salt in the pepper.”

The nine-year-old wasn't impressed with his open-faced turkey sandwich, either. It was dry, and the gravy was, well, boring. The six-year-old thought the cross-cut French fries were “great,” but the hash browns were “not so good.” (He was right, at least about the hash browns.) Neither the six-year-old nor the three-year-old was impressed with the macaroni and cheese—“plain”—but the three-year-old happily finished his pile of French fries. And the one-year-old...he was clearly thrilled with the saltines that came with the soups.

Our service was friendly, but glacial, and prices were reasonable. Nothing any adult had cost more than \$10. This restaurant used to be open all night, a definite draw in a city that closes down after midnight. That changed when the restaurant went to no-smoking a couple of years ago. As the waitress I talked with put it, “The kind of people who want to eat at 3:00 AM are the kind of people who like to smoke.” (The grocery store is still open 24 hours a day, except on holidays like Easter [oh well], and we recommend it as a good place to get interesting party supplies.)

Unless you're food shopping at Byerly's and are afraid you'll starve before you get home, skip the restaurant.

Byerly's

3777 Park Center Blvd, St Louis Park
Excelsior Blvd & Hwy 100
929-2100

American

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.

We went with Barb Jensen and David Emerson, and we all ordered different things. The mushroom pâté appetizer was served warm and we liked it a little better than Karen's homemade (wherein she tweaked Pamela Dean's recipe). The soba appetizer was quite tasty, though some of us thought the sauce a bit too creamy. Bruce tried the shrimp quesadilla, 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 flavorsome. 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 then 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.

Café Brenda

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

Vegetarian, Healthy

Sidewalk: Q-3.5, P-3
Zagat's: D-22, S-18, F-20, P-\$18
RR, TO, FP, BW, L, D, SF, GA

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 Niçoise*, 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 Niçoise*, 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? We were, however, quite impressed that the top was still warm.

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 1999 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers’ poll rates this the best French food in Minneapolis. *Sidewalk* calls this place “a local approximation of a New York bistro,” and there is indeed a parent restaurant in New York. The New York

Zagat's gives the New York branch an embarrassingly low 15 food rating and has this to say: "Large, loud fast French brasserie echo chamber near Times Square that continues to pack them in; if you order simply and have earplugs, you won't be disappointed." Here in Minneapolis, we were disappointed.

Café Un Deux Trois

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

French

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-3
Zagat's: D-22, S-20, F-19, P-\$23
RR, TO, PP, FB, L, D, SA, R, GA

Carver's—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 **Carver's** (albeit the review is three years old), 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 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 tiramisu; 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 \$8.00–\$9.50 for an appetizer, and entrées in the \$25.00 range, you should be able to count on a better meal.

Carver's

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

Continental

Sidewalk: Q-3.5, P-5
Zagat's: D-22, S-24, F-22, P-\$30
RR, PP, VP, FB, L, D, SA, GA

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 Sister Fun, **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 their "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
340-0032

Caribbean

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-3
Zagat's: D-21, S-18, F-17, P-\$15
NR, TO, GE, PP, FB, L, D, GD

Chinese

Ping's doesn't deserve to be a good 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.

Everything we had was tasty. 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 Tzo'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 personally refused to even look at.

Rainbow is the default Minn-StP Chinese restaurant. On the random Friday night we visited in order to write this review, we were one of three fannish tables. 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.

Sharon Kahn has 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, says Pamela Dean).

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.

Karen never worked at the **Nankin**. She had friends who did, though, and who told stories of being assigned to the "no dancing" section of the balcony, of the population segment who never failed to order "shrimp fried rice and Wanderer's Punch." It seemed like it was probably a horrible place to wait tables. The food is bad, too. And everyone says it's gone way downhill since moving to its City Center location.

Their menu is pretty standard American Chinese food: chow mein, fried rice, lo mein, egg foo young—that sort of thing. Even the entrées pander: sweet and sour chicken, beef with broccoli, BBQ duck, and the old vegetarian stand-by, Buddha's Delight. It's the sort of place you go for Chinese when the dish we call "celery mush chow mein" is what you think of when you think of Chinese food. Fans understand Chinese food better than that.

The recent news is that Nankin closed. According to Nankin's attorney, the final slide was "the PR nightmare that ensued from a police raid a couple of years ago." It was a drug bust, and 19 people were arrested. The attorney hastened to point out that none of those 19 were Nankin employees or customers, which leaves us to wonder what was going on. The recent bankruptcy filing halted a pending eviction notice. It doesn't sound very good at all.

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 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. They also do fine things with whole steamed fish, if a couple of you want to share. And our vegan friends can enjoy a meal here too. The service and the kitchen are both fast and competent. One of the Village Wok's many fine advantages is that they're open late. Guy Wicker comes to Minicon just to eat here.

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 the 1999 *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.)

Great Wall is an old Minn-STF tradition, but we haven't been there in at least a decade (it was rated the third-best Chinese restaurant in the 1999 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers' poll, for what that's worth). And there are dozens more Chinese restaurants we don't even know about, and a really good one near the Village Wok that Bruce had an excellent meal in once.

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. The bricks are disintegrating, the paint is flaky, and it looks kind of dirty. However, every time we've eaten there, the food has been anywhere from pretty good to just delicious. Beth Friedman is indecently fond of a dish

called *Papao Laiching*, with mixed meats and a slightly sweet sauce, that isn't on the menu anymore, but they'll make it for her if she asks.

The carts come out at 11 AM on weekends, and as Susan Levy Haskell pointed out prior to our last visit, 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. Susan 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.

Ping's Szechuan Bar and Grill

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

Chinese
Sidewalk: Q-2, P-3
Zagat's: D-20, S-17, F-18, P-\$17
RR, TO, DL, VP, FB, L, D, LL

Rainbow Chinese Restaurant

2739 Nicollet Ave, Minneapolis
and 28 St & Nicollet Ave
870-7084

Chinese
Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-2
Zagat's: D-23, S-11, F-20, P-\$13
RL, TO, GE, FP, BW, L, D, LL, BSO

Village Wok

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

Chinese
Sidewalk: P-2
Zagat's: D-20, S-9, F-14, P-\$11
TO, B, L, D, LL, LLL

Peking Garden

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

Chinese
Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-2
RL, TO, FP, BW, L, D, LL, LLL, GG

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, so new they have not made it into the local Zagat's, 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 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 the waiter is always willing to translate, explain, and recommend.

He's 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, if 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.

D'Amico Cucina

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

Italian

Sidewalk: Q-4, P-5
Zagat's: D-27, S-26, F-25, P-\$35
RE, PP, VP, FB, IWL, D, R, 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, and Morton's second. Zagat's rates them this way, as does the 1998 *Minnesota Monthly* readers' poll, the 1998 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers' poll, and the 1998 *Gourmet* magazine readers' poll. Kind of makes you wonder if they all have the same readers. The 1998 Zagat's *America's Top Restaurants* book, in its trademark "sound bites" style, says this about Manny's: "They go berserk' with 'monster slabs of beef' at this 'heaven for meat lovers' in the Downtown Minneapolis Hyatt; a lippy, New-York-wanna-be staff provides a 'macho experience' in a 'cigars-and-scotch' 'clubby atmosphere' for 'red-meat fans on expense accounts'—'if I were a steer, this is where I'd want to end up'; P.S. the veal chops, lobsters, and wines are also 'faves.'" Wow.

They are a little less gushy about Morton's: "You 'feel naughty eating' in this 'classic beef lovers' spot, a 'dark' 'men's restaurant' that's a 'perfect place to have an affair' or to stage a 'power dinner'; although some also find the setting

‘claustrophobic,’ ‘cramped’ and ‘noisy,’ ‘you can’t go wrong’ with the ‘enormous’ and ‘very expensive’ portions of ‘serious steak and fish,’ even if they’re ‘nothing you can’t cook yourself.’” (Actually, you probably can’t cook it yourself. The aged prime cuts of meat served at these places aren’t generally available to the public.)

Murray’s is the old guard Minneapolis steak house. Its great claim to fame is that it is 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 either of our fathers. And it was good, for steak.

Ruth’s Chris is the third best steak house in downtown Minneapolis, at least according to the various readers’ polls. It’s also the closest one to the Minicon hotel. Beth Friedman and Geri Sullivan had dinner there and shared the porterhouse steak. It was a nice hunk of flavorful cow. They recommend the crème brûlée if you have room for dessert.

Dara Moskowitz, writing for Minneapolis’s *City Pages*, recently reviewed both Ruth’s Chris and Morton’s (as well as the St. Paul Grill, a high-end steak house in St. Paul), complaining that they were all pretty much identical. She praised Morton’s lobster bisque, key lime pie, and hot onion bread. She panned Ruth’s Chris’s gumbo.

We also have the Capital Grille and Merchants, two new pricey downtown steak houses (both opened within the last year and a half). How much wood paneling can one city take?

(Late breaking news: the 1999 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers’ poll rated Murray’s first, Manny’s second, Ruth’s Chris third, Timber Lodge Steakhouse [where did that come from?] fourth, and Morton’s fifth. Looks like an industry shakeup to us.)

As far as cheaper dead cows (i.e., hamburgers) go, we have some suggestions. The 1999 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers’ poll recommends (in order) the Lion’s Tap Family Restaurant, the Convention Grill & Fountain, Fuddruckers, Champps, and Grandma’s Saloon & Grill. 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 probably get an adequate burger at the Hilton’s Harmony’s restaurant, though, and not have to go outside.

Manny’s Steakhouse

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

Steak

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-5
Zagat’s: D-27, S-21, F-25, P-\$33
RR, TO, PP, IWL, D, SA

Murray’s

26 S 6 St, Minneapolis
Hennepin Ave and S 6 St
339-0909

Steak

Sidewalk: Q-3.5, P-5
Zagat’s: D-24, S-19, F-23, P-\$28
RR, TO, PP, IWL, L, D, LE, AT, Da,
SF, R

Morton's of Chicago

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

Ruth's Chris Steak House

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

Steak

Sidewalk: Q-3.5, P-5
Zagat's: D-25, S-23, F-24, P-\$35
RE, PP, VP, FB, IWL, L, D, GG

Steak

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-4
Zagat's: D-25, S-22, F-23, P-\$32
RR, PP, FB, IWL, D, SA

El Meson

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 beer, but currently do not serve wine. Even a mediocre sangria would be nice to have with dinner. You can bring in your own bottle, and the corkage fee is a mere \$3. That's a good route. 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 Meson
3450 Lyndale Ave S, Minneapolis
W 34th St & Lyndale Ave S
822-8062

Spanish, Latin American
Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-3
Zagat's: D-19, S-12, F-17, P-\$12
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!”

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 convention hotel. You want eggs at some odd hour? They’ve got ‘em. You belong to All-Night Fandom, and want to crawl out into daylight for actual food before crashing? Embers will be open.

Now, 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 as they always were. 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 over the last ten or so years.

The menu listed many of the same items Karen served back when. A few of the good ones were gone. The ribs were surprisingly good when made right (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 it was the centerpiece of the menu for decades. 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.

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
377-6920

American

Sidewalk: P-2
NR, TO, FP, B, L, D, LL, LLL, 24

Figlio

When the Calhoun Square Mall was built (we don't suppose anyone calls it "Update" 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 tapenade 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 never 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, something with which the readers of *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* agree. They also awarded Figlio the “best appetizers” award in their 1998 poll. If we had voted, we would have agreed.

Figlio's

Calhoun Square, 3001 Nennepin Ave
S, Minneapolis
W Lake St & Hennepin Ave S
822-1688

Italian

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-3
Zagat's: D-19, S-17, F-17, P-\$16
TO, VP, PP, FB, SB, L.D.LL, LLL,
OS

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 voted it “tops for fun,” whatever that means. *Minnesota Monthly* and *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers consider it the third best German restaurant, which is less of an honor when you realize that you can't 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 wait staff 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.

An interesting side note: Gasthof Zur Gemutlichkeit is another restaurant where Richard, everyone's favorite waiter from Chez Colette, used to work. No, we don't know where he is now.

Black Forest Inn

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

German

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-19, S-20, F-17, P-\$14
NR, TO, FP, FB, L, D, LL, LLL, OS,
BA

Gasthof Zur Gemuetlichkeit

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

German

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-3
Zagat's: D-20, S-22, F-20, P-\$18
RR, TO, FP, FB, SB, D, LE, Da

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 *arrabittia*—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 Sidewalk rate the food better, we may be overreacting, or have been there on an off night. Sidewalk'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 much too close, the place too crowded, and that the staff has "an attitude." 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 "fantastic, authentic, flavor-forward Tuscan fare," and Sidewalk says similarly gushing things about the food. The *City Pages*, which we usually rely on to be more realistic about things, 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.

Giorgio

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

Italian

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-3
Zagat's: D-24, S-16, F-19, P-\$19
NR, TO, FP, BW, L, D

Giorgio's on Lake

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

Italian

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-2
Zagat's: D-18, S-14, F-13, P-\$13
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 undisputably the best restaurant in the Twin Cities. This has changed somewhat; in the 1999 *Mpls.St. Paul Magazine* survey it was rated third, and in the last *Gourmet* survey of Minneapolis restaurants it was listed second. And we think it will fall even further

as restaurants like Aquavit and The Local get a larger following. But it's still just as good.

Two years ago Goodfellow's moved from its location in the Conservatory (8th and Nicollet) 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. Our last visit was with Beth Friedman. She 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. And Beth 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 adject-

tives 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
332-4800

American

Sidewalk: Q-4, P-5
Zagat’s: D-28, S-25, F-26, P-\$36
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 Minicon 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 city. It might even be the best ethnic 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 taste, having given up trying to explain the 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 fa-

vorites—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.

Myconos 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 best Greek in the 1999 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers’ poll.

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.

It took us three tries to get to **Saffron**, a self-styled “Greek and Persian café” in South Minneapolis. The first two times it was closed due to weather. It’s a newish family-run restaurant, located in a former Kwik-E-Mart (or whatever they call them these days). The owner tried to do a good job on the place; the walls are nicely painted, the floors look good, there are tablecloths on the tables and all the chairs match. The whole thing felt a little cheap, but was still a nicer looking place than many foreign restaurateurs manage when starting out.

The menu is all standard fare: gyros, souvlaki, kebabs, moussaka. Nothing was done badly, but nothing stood out either. Service was friendly, if a bit rushed. Our next courses kept coming out before we finished with the ones we already had. There’s much better Greek/Persian food to be had in the Twin Cities; there’s no real reason to come here.

Gardens of Salonica

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

Christos

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

Greek

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-2
Zagat’s: D-25, S-18, F-14, P-\$9
RL, TO, FP, BW, L, D, NCC, GD

Greek

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-2
Zagat’s: D-19, S-16, F-17, P-\$14
RR, TO, GE, FP, BW, L, D, R

Myconos Greek Restaurant

1420 Nicollet Ave, Minneapolis
 W 15 St & Nicollet Ave
 870-1114

Greek

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-3
 RR, TO, GE, BW, L, D, LL, OS

It's Greek to Me

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

Greek

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-20, S-15, F-18, P-\$14
 RL, TO, BW, L, D

Aladdin Cafe

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

Greek, Mediterranean

Sidewalk: P-2
 TO, DL, PP, L, D, LL, LLL,

Saffron

3501 Nicollet Ave S, Minneapolis
 W 35 St and Nicollet Ave S
 823-4442

Greek, Middle Eastern

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
 TO, FP, BW, L, D, MS

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 Sidewalk'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 Minn-stf has a couple of Harmony's experts. Geri Sullivan and Jeff Schalles have regularly eaten there over the years, way before the Hilton was the Minicon hotel. 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. Geri recommended the linguini with shrimp and pesto cream, an item that had unfortunately 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. But our order was taken quickly and our food arrived quickly. If that's how they manage when the hotel is crowded, we're going to do well.

The real question is: How does Harmony's compare with Kaffe Stuga? The food is definitely better; Stuga was uniformly pretty mediocre. It's also more expensive; the downtown Hilton is just a more expensive hotel. There's no buffet; one of the good things about Stuga was being able to get a table and immediately head to the buffet. You can't do that anymore, so it can't be as fast.

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

One of the ancillary benefits of a Harmony's meal is a parking voucher. Here's how it works: Enter a lot run by the Minneapolis Downtown Council (that's the one underneath the hotel, and many others besides) "after 4:00 PM weekdays, or all day Saturday and Sunday." Make a purchase for \$20 or more at "a participating merchant or restaurant"; Harmony's is one of these participating restaurants. Ask for a parking voucher. When you leave the parking ramp, on the same day, present the voucher as you are leaving.

This won't do you any good if you arrive on Friday, eat at Harmony's on Friday night, and try to leave on Saturday. (Although you might try it; parking ramp attendants are not known for their keen analytical minds.) It won't help if you arrive on Friday, eat at Harmony's on Saturday, and try to leave on Sunday. But if you have to run home to feed your cat after a Harmony's dinner on Saturday night, this might save you some of the in-and-out parking charges you would have otherwise racked up.

Easter News: Harmony's is open Easter Sunday, but only serving a large buffet. The good news is that the buffet will be open from 11:00 AM until 4:30 PM, which means that it will still be going on when we all wake up. The bad news is that it will be expensive: \$19.95 for adults, less for children. But for that you not only get food, you get "candy for the children, elaborate ice sculptures, decorative displays," and a visit from the Easter Bunny. Wow. Presumably this kind of thing will fill up with families looking to celebrate the holiday, so call ahead for reservations: 397-4927.

Harmony's

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

American

Sidewalk: P-2
TO, PP, FB, B, L, D, SA

Jewel of India

There's not a lot of Indian food in the Twin Cities, and we don't tend to seek it out for some reason (too busy slurping up *pho*, probably). Here's an option that's not far from the hotel.

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 hhata* (an eggplant dish), and several others. There was also tandoori chicken (served with 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.

Jewel of India

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

Indian

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
TO, GE, PP, FB, AB, L, D, OS, BA

Taste of India

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

Indian

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-2
RR, TO, FP, BW, SB, L, D, SF

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 surpris-

ing fun; often they go home with bizarre tales about the weirdos who were at their 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 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).

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.

If you're willing to drive to St. Paul, **Sakura** is the place to go. The fish is at least as fresh as Origami, and the restaurant, in its third downtown St. Paul location, is a pretty place, with lots of room for ever-expanding fannish sushi expeditions. Sakura is the default Minn-stf sushi place. Joel Rosenberg likes this place better than anyone we know, so we'll let him explain:

“At any first-rate sushi restaurant, you expect to find shockingly fresh fish, appealing presentations, and an occasional momentary frisson of sadomasochistic heat from a node of wasabi carefully concealed in a piece of nigiri sushi. But only at Sakura do you get Myoko Amori, the owner and frequent hostess, who supervises the operation with a keen and kindly eye, a genuine smile, and a dedication to get it right the first time; and who remembers you the second time you walk in.

“A good place to start is with the Sakura Sushi special, the chef’s selection of maki and nigiri. I prefer to substitute the clear soup for the default miso soup. And you’re likely to want to fill in the cracks with an order from the sushi menu. The spider roll, California roll, and salmon skin rolls will likely be to the taste of new sushi eaters as well as devotees, and it’s fun to freak out the new *sushisti* with an order of *amaebi* (‘sweet shrimp’). ‘And please do deep-fry the shrimp-heads, eh?’ ‘Hai!’

“Do ask about the specials; if there’s *toro* (fatty tuna) available, be sure to try it. If you haven’t had breakfast, an order of *tobiko* with quail eggs might be just the ticket.”

We like it, too.

Fuji-ya, on the other hand, is a disaster. 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 and left the scene for a decade. Now, she’s reopened the family firm, in a nice south Minneapolis location. Unfortunately, this isn’t the restaurant it once was. And it sure isn’t the restaurant we wanted it to be.

We were there once, with a large party. Not only was the food uniformly mediocre, but the service was terrible. The waitress got several of the orders wrong and brought the food out at wildly different times. It wasn’t until people had finished their meals that she finally got around to bringing the bowl of *rice* to the table. Her excuse, that the rice wasn’t ready, was either a lie or says that something went horribly wrong in the Japanese kitchen. Others have had equally bad experiences there, although we have some friends who claim to have had completely uneventful meals. Hardly an endorsement, though.

Improvements are on the way, though. Writing in the *City Pages* of 3 March 99, Dara Moskowitz wrote: “Basically, my review concluded that the new Fuji-ya was a nice try but no cigar, that the sushi was uneven and the servers sometimes obtusely clueless. And wouldn’t you know it, the owners have spent the past few months powering through an aggressive improvement campaign. Last December they introduced Teng Thao as their new sushi chef—fans will recognize Thao, nicknamed Tengo, from the sushi bar at Origami. April 1 will see the introduction of a new kitchen manager, and a new menu will follow sometime this spring.” She continues by talking about a recent lunch she had there, with was “a million-mile leap ahead” from her previous experiences. If you go, let us know how it is.

Then there’s **Nobu**. It’s not standard. It’s high-end Japanese. It’s in New York. But as a point of comparison, we thought it useful to describe a meal from the best Japanese restaurant in the United States.

This restaurant has a menu, but the common thing to do is to order “*omakase*,” which means something like “I put myself in your hands,” only with a

more culinary bent. The menu prices it at “\$60 and up,” meaning you can pump as much money into it as you like. Bruce once asked the waiter if there were limitations, and was told that at about \$160 you reached the point of diminishing returns. This is the omasake menu, on a random night, for \$100:

1. *Toro tartare*, topped with *osetra* caviar, a strong wasabi sauce, a leaf from an edible pansy, and a mountain peach
2. Eel *haramaki* (similar to a spring roll or crepe), with asparagus shoot, salmon roe, flecks of gold, pansy and peach
3. *Kumamoto* oysters and *tai* (Japanese snapper), asparagus, tomato, cucumber, frizzled leeks, all seared in olive oil
4. Sashimi salad: shrimp, mushroom, cucumber, and eggplant on pea shoots
5. Lobster in spicy garlic sauce, baby spinach
6. Grilled sea bass, *foie gras*, figs, fried leek sticks
7. Miso soup with “sari” clams
8. Sushi: *toro*, yellowtail, salmon, eel, mackerel, whitefish
9. Bento box: green tea ice cream and a warm chocolate soufflé with *shiso* leaf sauce

Probably best was the *toro tartare*. The *kumamos* were heavily dressed, and did not stand out as we like them. The lobster was delightful, though we thought the spicy sauce wasn’t very. The bass/*foie*/fig was very sensuous, and the miso was not so good as *dobe mushi*, but still amazing.

The restaurant is pleasant, if a bit noisy. And it’s hard to get a table; we’re nobodies, so we have to reserve at least a month in advance. And the service is a bit stiff, but the food is worth it. Someday, we are going to know enough about the food to order à la carte at this place.

Ichiban Japanese Steak House

1333 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis
Grant St and Nicollet Ave
339-0540

Japanese

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-5

Zagat’s: D-19, S-19, F-19, P-\$21
RR, TO, PP, FB, D, SS

Origami

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

Japanese

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-3

Zagat’s: D-25, S-20, F-20, P-\$19
NR, TO, FB, L, D, GD

Sakura

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

Japanese

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-3

Zagat’s: D-26, S-12, F-21, P-\$17
RL, TO, GE, PP, FB, L, D

Fuji-Ya

2640 Lyndale Ave S, Minneapolis
W 26th St & Lyndale Ave S
871-4055

Japanese

Sidewalk: Q-1.5, P-3
RR, TO, FP, BW, L, D

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 both "best breakfast" and one of the "cheap eats" restaurants in the 1999 *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.

The *Pioneer Press* says: "This family owned, family friendly operation has been serving the 'food you grew up with' for 24 years. Although all nine Keys restaurants are not a cookie-cutter chain, they do have the same heart and soul of the original Keys. All serve the same 'to-die-for' soups, huge and hearty breakfasts, and fresh roast turkey, which is used in Keys' classic turkey dinners and hot turkey sandwiches (made with homemade white bread)."

Sidewalk says: "If Paul Bunyan married Betty Crocker, they'd feed you lumberjack platters of homestyle Midwestern food like this. Nothing fancy, just lots of it (there must be three potatoes in a plate of American fries). A perennial staple of local 'best breakfast' lists, Keys slings hash (roast beef or sausage), steak and eggs, omelets and pancakes (blueberry-bran, raisin-pecan) whenever they're open. Depending on location, that might be until mid-afternoon or late in the evening. Keys was started in 1973 by earth mother Barbara Hunn, and, as her brood matured and acquired spouses and kids, she expanded to keep them all busy. There now are nine Keys locking up the cities and northern suburbs. Besides breakfast, Keys serves lunches and dinners of burgers, hot and cold sandwiches (the open-faced grilled vegetable sandwich is an unexpected pleasure), and motherly comforts such as turkey or meatloaf with mashed potatoes and gravy. Keys' bakery turns out mammoth cookies, pies, caramel rolls and cakes. Each restaurant has its own, mostly ranch-house look, but for greasy-spoon authenticity try the original Keys on St. Paul's Raymond Avenue. Wine and beer at some locations."

Zagat's says: "'Typical truck stop' 'home cooking,' with 'lumberjack-size portions of comfort food,' a 'greasy-spoon' menu and 'minimal' décor, have led this 'neighborhood diner' run by a chatty mother-daughter team to expand to several metro locations; you're advised to 'go hungry,' 'forget your fat intake,' and 'split with friends.'"

Beth Friedman also likes Keys, as does John Ladwig.

Keys Restaurant

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

American

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-17, S-10, F-15, P-\$9
TO, PP, BW, B, L, D, KF

Korean

Korea House has a telephone, but don't bother calling because no one working there knows enough English to answer your questions. 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.

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 them both a "no atmosphere but authentic and cheap and good" rating. We've never been to either.

But we have been to Hangawi.

Hangawi is a magical restaurant, an oasis in the middle of the city. The room is quiet; you take your shoes off at the door and quietly pad around the cool pine floorboards. The décor is dark woods and light walls and Korean pottery. The music is quiet and almost imperceptible. The aromas from the kitchen and other tables even more inviting. It's all as calm and lovely as a Buddhist temple.

The food, served on low tables by expert servers, will probably be the best vegetarian meal you will eat in your life: artfully presented, wonderfully flavored, and completely foreign. You've probably never tasted anything like the mountain roots, grainy porridges, and delicate soups, but if you can just accept each course as your server places it before you and, in hushed tones, explains what it is, you're in for a wonderful experience.

The only possible downside is that Hangawi is in New York. But there aren't enough Korean restaurants in Minneapolis to fill this section, so we're going to review it anyway.

The menu is completely indecipherable, so just order the Emperor's meal. It changes all the time, and its many courses let you sit back, relax, and wait for the unexpected to arrive. And it does: delicate soups, delicious greens, pumpkin porridge, dense tofus in flavorful sauces. Our favorite is the Emperor's rolls: tiny pancakes made with different vegetables centered in a plate of vegetables flown in from obscure mountainsides in Korea. The *kimchi* and *namul* are both divine. The pace is so slow and the mood so relaxing that you lose track of the courses. Gingko nuts, mung beans, acorn curd, *kosari* shoots, a hairy mountain root called *todok*, strange mushrooms: it's all exotic and delicious.

Hangawi is strictly vegetarian: no meats, no dairy, no eggs. Don't let this put you off. One visit, Bruce dined with a die-hard meat-eating friend. Afterwards he was amazed: "I have no idea what I ate, but it was delicious and I'm full." It was also a wonderful meal.

Mai's Korea House

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

Korean

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.

The verdict isn'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.

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 inordinately 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 advisor to the kitchen.

Lincoln Del

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

Deli

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-18, S-11, F-16, P-\$12
TO, FP, FB, B, L, D, LL, LE, KF

The Local

It's an Irish pub with an ornate bar and a cozy café. It's a fine restaurant. By the time you read this, it's going to be a nightclub. And eventually, a hotel. **The Local** is so many things that we can only review it in pieces.

The pub 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.

The restaurant is in the back, much more elegant and much more expensive. We were there once, on probably the worst possible day of the year to go: St. Patrick's Day. (Honestly...we forgot. We would never have gone had we known.) The bar and pub were packed, but we had reservations in the restaurant. The good news is that even under extreme conditions, the food was excellent, the service was professional and friendly, and although it was slow it picked up immediately after we complained.

Everything we had was good: the leek and cheese tart garnished with prosciutto and roasted figs, the parsley risotto with monster-sized prawns and tomatoes, the raw oysters drizzled in a Guinness sauce. The star of the meal was the puréed snap pea and mint soup; like the corn soup we had months earlier, it was just delicious.

The Local has an excellent wine list. The selection is large, covering California, France, Italy, Germany, South America, Australia, and some other places too. And it's very reasonably priced; many of the wines aren't marked up at all from liquor store prices.

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.)

And the place is owned by Kieran Folliard, who also owns local music hot spot Kieran's Irish Pub, a stage on which have appeared many local fannish musicians. And Kieran's Irish Pub is worth stopping by for a meal, too.

Local

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

Irish, American

Sidewalk: Q-3.5, P-5
 VP, PP, FB, IWL, SB, L, D, LL, LLL,
 LE, OS, R

The Loring Cafe

For about a year now, an informal group of hackers and other computer-telco-techie lowlifes have been meeting on Thursday nights at the **Loring Cafe** for dinner. It's not every Thursday night; people are out-of-town much too often to make it something regular. And it's not even always on Thursday night; even when people are in town, they have complicated schedules. But it's 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
332-1617

American Eclectic

Sidewalk: Q-3.5, P-5
Zagat's: D-20, S-22, F-14, P-\$19
RR, VP, FB, SB, L, D, LL, LLL, LE, R

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.

Bruce likes **Tacos Blass** (technically, it's called "Taqueria 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. On 38th and Nicollet, 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, on 15th and Lake St., 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.

Tacos Morelos, on 26th and Nicollet, 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.

Los Amigos, on the corner of Blaisdell and 28th, is another dive. They make a very good mole sauce and everything else we've tasted is okay, too.

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 an empty hole in the ground and we don't know what happened, nor when or whether they might reopen.

Tacos Don Blas

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

Mexican

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-1
NR, TO, L, D, NCC

Me Gusta

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

Mexican

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-2
RL, TO, FP, BW, B, L, D, LE, SF

Tacos Morelos

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

Mexican

Sidewalk: P-2
NR, TO, FP, B, L, D, OS

Los Amigos

2746 Blaisdell Ave. S., Minneapolis
S 28th St & Blaisdell Ave
871-1262

Mexican

Little Tijuana

17 E 26 St, Minneapolis
Nicollet Ave and E 26 St
872-0578

Mexican

Sidewalk: Q-1.5, P-2
TO, L, D, LL, LLL, BA

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 a belly dancer 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, Pamela Dean and Raphael Carter, tell us that **Java**, Minn-st's default Middle Eastern restaurant, 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 on fannish dinner expeditions.

Falafel King is a counter-style fast food Middle Eastern restaurant that is 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.

There's also the **Caspian Bistro**, which we know nothing about. Sidewalk says: "Authentic Middle Eastern cuisine. Specialties include grilled chicken, beef and lamb kebabs, gyros and lamb shank. Basmati rice served with all dishes. Desserts include baklava and Persian ice cream." It's not even in Zagat's.

And **Saffron** is a "Greek and Persian café." We reviewed it in the section on Greek restaurants.

Emily's Lebanese Deli
641 University Ave NE, Minneapolis
7th Ave NE & University Ave NE
379-4069

Middle Eastern
Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-23, S-10, F-17, P-\$9
RL, TO, FP, L, D, NCC, GD

Jerusalem's

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

Java

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

Falafel King

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

Caspian Bistro

2418 University Ave SE, Minneapolis
 25th Ave SE & University Ave SE
 623-1113

Middle Eastern

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-2
Zagat's: D-20, S-13, F-15, P-\$13
 RL, TO, FP, BW, L, D, LE, OS

Middle Eastern

Sidewalk: P-2
 RL, TO, FP, L, D, LE, NCC

Middle Eastern

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-23, S-10, F-17, P-\$9
 RL, TO, FP, BW, L, D, LL, OS, NCC

Middle Eastern

Sidewalk: P-2
 RL, TO, FP, L, D

Milda's

Not far from downtown, just past the Farmer's Market and the impound lot, there's a little café in a nothing-much neighborhood. The building, a one-story row of several stores, with the café anchoring one end, is supposed to be torn down, and that will be a shame. 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 iron ore 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 town, you have 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. The booths are made of bright aqua Formica, and the table tops are worn from thousands and thousands of meals. 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
1825 Glenwood Ave, Minneapolis
Logan Ave N & Glenwood Ave
377-9460

American
Sidewalk: P-1
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, a spare room that was closed on our late evening visit.

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 wasn't smoky, so perhaps it's the sort of place where everybody smokes, but nobody smokes very much. If that makes a difference. To put it another way: This is the restaurant Emma should have put in *War For The Oaks*.

The kitchen's not open late; show up after ten and all you get is soup and bread. The soup was fine, and the baguette was just the fluffy side of pleasantly chewy. The local title for best baguette moves around town pretty regularly, and it's not currently the New French's turn (we think Kawalski's Market in St. Paul has current top honors), but it has been in the past.

The food, which we didn't get a chance to try, goes through the \$20 and up range per plate, so it's not an inexpensive meal, but we can be sure it'll be a good one. You'll be glad you went.

In the 1999 readers' poll, *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers voted it second best French restaurant.

New French Café
128 N 4th St, Minneapolis
2nd Ave N & N 4th St
338-3790

French
Sidewalk: Q-3.5, P-5
RR, PP, VP, FB, IWL, B, SB, L, D, R

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 (we're not as devoted to brunch as other local fans), but the 1999 *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* readers' poll voted it one of the best brunches in the Twin Cities.

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

Nicollet Island Inn

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

American

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-5
Zagat's: D-20, S-25, F-20, P-\$26
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. Though the restaurant has been open for months, the cushion on Karen's side of the booth teeter-tottered dismayingly when she sat down, so we're not sure if the construction is actually finished. The **Oceanaire** Seafood Room is brand new (doors opened in November), and 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. We ordered two of the exotics: grilled yellowfin tuna with red wine reduction and shitake 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 it 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.

The menu has three non-seafood options: grilled chicken, steak, and a pork chop. There's also a very pricy "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.

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. They have 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 served.

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 have seen more whites and fewer reds available by the glass, but we assume 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. And while it's nice to see a quality seafood restaurant in the Twin Cities, we were left with the feeling that it just wasn't worth it.

Oceanaire

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

Seafood

Sidewalk: Q-3.5, P-5
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.

Sidewalk 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 sand-

wiches 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: "Coming from Denver not Chicago, these chain 'new hot spots' in the Warehouse District and Uptown [three more locations have since been added] are 'sports bar'/pizzeria-cum-billiards parlors with a speakeasy aura; a 'youthful crowd' appreciates the 'most extensive selection of beers ever' and 'reasonable prices,' but 'the pizzas can be a disappointment' and 'sauces are bland.'"

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

Good luck to you if you go.

Old Chicago

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

Pizza

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-16, S-18, F-17, P-\$12
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 attitude 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
339-3800

Italian

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-3
Zagat's: D-24, S-25, F-23, P-\$24
RE, TO, PP, FB, IWL, L, D, SA

Peter's Grill

This is another one we've not managed to get to, and will finesse by stealing the review of others.

Zagat's: "For a 'real 1940s-style lunch' it's "worthwhile to visit' this 'art deco' 'throwback' for some of the 'best farmer food in the Twin Cities,' but 'don't cross the grandma-type waitresses,' 'some of the oldest west of the Mississippi,' who load you up with 'potatoes, gravy and apple pie.'"

Sidewalk: "When President Clinton swung through town in 1995, his escorts chose this bustling 1914 landmark for lunch. Said to be Minneapolis' oldest restaurant, Peter's is dear to downtown office workers because it never changes: Even in moving to its current bigger, brighter corner a few years back, it preserved the beloved cramped booths, luncheonette counter, brusque service and home-style fare. Except for the immensely satisfying apple pie, the food isn't extraordinary: sandwiches on standard store bread, burgers and fries, broiled steaks and chops, plus daily specials such as banana fritters that come straight from the Depression. But it's so, well, historic. Where else in town can you get a sardine sandwich? Or, for that matter, the \$9.45 President Clinton Special: a Canadian bacon-egg sandwich on pumpernickel with vegetable soup, apple pie and Diet Coke? The waitresses have the seen-it-all weariness of those who have been slinging hash for a lifetime, and on a good day they can get you in and out for lunch in half an hour. Peter's also offers breakfast six days a week and dinner till 7:45 PM weekdays, with a \$3.25 baked chicken special on Wednesdays."

Beth Friedman used to go to Peter's Grill regularly when she worked downtown. She's fond of their soups (especially the beef barley) and steak fries, and has been known to make a meal of soup, fries, and dessert. This is the best apple pie she's ever had, and they have cinnamon ice cream to go with it. Their

other fruit pies, especially blackberry, are also excellent. Other than that, you're on your own.

Peter's Grill

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

American

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-16, S-15, F-17, P-\$9
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). And we've eaten pizza at the ConFusion hotel in Detroit that was so indescribably bad that we couldn't finish it.

There's two kinds of pizza these days: yuppie pizza and traditional pizza. Yuppie pizza first: You can get it at Sidney's (page 73), Green Mill, Punch Woodfire Pizza, Palomino (page 69), and Figlio (page 43). 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 some 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. Ask for one. We are not sure about their new "Oyster Bar" concept. The bar itself has lots of wine specials listed on signs everywhere but never mentions oysters. When we asked what kind of oysters they were serving, they said: "Raw. On the half shell." Buyer beware.

Traditional pizza is harder; there just isn't any great pizza in Minneapolis. **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.) And Broadway Pizza also does a decent job.

But since we can't talk about good pizza in the specific, we'll talk about it in the abstract. There are two basic styles of pizza: New York and Chicago. New York pizza is thin crust; Chicago pizza is deep dish. And if you want to eat them, go to New York and Chicago.

The traditional best New York pizza is at a Manhattan pizza place called Ray's. So many people know this that several pizza restaurants use that name or others like it. There's Ray's, Original Ray's, and a couple more. Last we heard, they're all battling it out in court for the right to the name, and meanwhile their food quality has gone downhill.

Bruce prefers Queen, an old-style pizza restaurant in downtown Brooklyn. (Here, "old-style" means coal-burning ovens, all fresh ingredients, cooks that don't speak any English.) It's moved from where it was when Bruce's father

used to take him there, but the food is still just as good. Thin, crispy, delicious. It's the best pizza in the world.

The best Chicago-style pizza is (in Chicago) at Pizzeria Uno (and Pizzeria Due a block away). Ignore the weird topping choices; this is the pinnacle of this style of pizza. There are a couple of Pizzeria Uno restaurants in Minneapolis now, but don't be fooled—they're inferior imitations, and the new restaurants are part of a chain. Rumor hath that the real Uno's in Chicago sold the name, but not the recipe.

According to reports, St. Paul has good pizza at Punch Woodfire Pizza and also at Cossetta. (Which is best according to Zagat's. Beth Friedman says Cossetta's is very good pizza of the in-between kind—not thin crust, not thick crust. Just sort of substantial. And it's one of the two places in the Twin Cities (Casalenda's is the other) where the sausage is good enough that she orders a sausage pizza by choice instead of as part of negotiating not to have any evil green things on the pizza.) We've never been to either, but we'd like to hear from other people who have.

Green Mill

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

Pizza

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-2
Zagat's: D-18, S-14, F-15, P-\$13
NR, TO, GE, FP, FB, D, LL

Edwardo's

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

Pizza

Sidewalk: Q-1.5, P-3
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, located at Seven Corners, where Cafe Havana used to be. 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 *tostones* 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 might not exist anymore by the time you read this. It seems the owner of the building is looking to tear the whole place down and sell the land for some large high-rise building to house U of M students. If this happens, Puerta Azul will try to move.

Puerta Azul

231 Cedar Ave, Minneapolis
Washington Ave S & Cedar Ave
349-5992

Caribbean

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-2
TO, PP, L, D, OS, SF

Rock Bottom Brewery

Erm. Okay, we ate there once, and neither of us can remember a single thing about the food. We recall that they're brewing beer on-site (ooooo, how... something). It was non-toxic, and might even have been good. Beth Friedman has eaten there several times, rather more than she would have chosen of her own free will. What she mostly remembers is that none of the descriptions on the menu sounded very appetizing, but everything looked quite edible once it arrived. And despite the impressive beer selection, they didn't carry hard cider.

This is another restaurant chain, so the food won't be bad, and the noise level will be too high. 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 poll (Old Chicago beat it). It's just not the kind of place we go to.

So, what does everyone else say? Zagat's: "A million and one singles' in 'suits' crowd the pool tables of this new 'hip' and 'boisterous' microbrewery in Downtown Minneapolis, where on-view tanks steal the show from the Prairie School 'chain décor'; a 'friendly' staff 'goes out of the way to help' and the 'homemade brews' make the 'typical,' 'hearty' pub food 'tolerable.'"

Sidewalk: "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 go to Palomino upstairs. You're on your own.

Rock Bottom Brewery

825 Hennepin Ave, Minneapolis
S 9th St & Hennepin Ave
332-2739

American

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-3
Zagat's: D-15, S-19, F-18, P-\$14
RR, TO, FB, L, D, LE, P, OS, SA

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've been around long enough to care), 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 best restaurant for casual dining. Their pizza also wins awards for best yuppie-style pizza; Zagat's, for example, awards those honors.

Sidney's

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

Pizza

Sidewalk: Q-3, P-3
Zagat's: D-23, S-20, F-20, P-\$15
TO, FP, BW, B, SB, L, D, LL, SF, OS

Snoodles

Judging from our lunchtime experience, **Snoodles** might not be around by Minicon-time. It won't be any loss.

Snoodles bills itself as serving "traditional cuisine." This means it serves basic American stuff. There's a restaurant, and a bar. The restaurant looks nice from a distance, but unfortunately that might attract you into eating there.

The food is poor. Chicken wings—ish. Grilled chicken sandwich—blech. Chicken soup—acceptable, but barely. Club sandwich—not good. There are other standards on the menu: burgers, French dip, a few pasta dishes. We didn't have the strength to try anything else.

They have a nice array of live plants in the windows and throughout the restaurant, but other than that there's nothing else nice to say about the place. The restaurant was not very clean, and the tablecloths were stained. We had to share menus, as there weren't enough to go around. Our waitress was not very good: forgetful, inexperienced. She had to transcribe our orders from the one menu at the table. She had trouble bringing our entire order, and forgot to bring requested condiments.

We wouldn't go back, even if we were paid.

Snoodles

1400 Nicollet Ave, Minneapolis
W 14th St and Nicollet Ave
871-0018

American

Sidewalk: P-2
NR, FB, B, L, D, MS

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This Minneapolis downtown restaurant, with its delightfully booksy name, is a second location of the establishment that shares 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 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 pretension 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. 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

Sidewalk: Q-3.5, P-4
Zagat's: D-23, S-16, F-19, P-\$20
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.

Pamela Dean has gone to Sawatdee for lunch, once a week, for over twelve years. Here's what she has to say: "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 from a convention, 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-sam-un 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 is an old downtown standby. Not nearly as haute as Sawat-dee, it cooks consistently good food in a friendly atmosphere. Their pad Thai is excellent; the noodles are served al dente and the sauce is tasty. Their coconut curries are also good. 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 Viet-

name's 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." I suppose, but sometimes this can make puzzling out the menu a little challenging. 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 exactly 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).

Chiang Mai Thai has gotten excellent reviews by pretty much everyone who has reviewed it, not only us.

There's also Bangkok Thai in Dinkytown. We don't know anything about it.

Sawatdee

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

Thai

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-2
Zagat's: D-21, S-16, F-18, P-\$15
RL, PP, FB, L, D, LL, LLL, LE, OS

Sawatdee

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

Thai

Sidewalk: Q-2.5, P-2
Zagat's: D-21, S-16, F-18, P-\$15
RL, TO, GE, FP, FB, L, D

The King and I

1034 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis
S 11th St & Nicollet Mall
332-6928

Thai

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-3
Zagat's: D-21, S-17, F-18, P-\$15
RR, TO, PP, BW, L, D

Chiang Mai Thai

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

Thai

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
RL, TO, PP, FB, L, D, OS

Times Cafe

The Times is a short walk from the convention 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" (though beer aficionado John Ladwig prefers Summit Extra Pale 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 fannish demographics, it sounds like the makings of quite a party.

Times Bar and Cafe

1036 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis
S 11th St & Nicollet Mall
333-2762

American

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-18, S-19, F-17, P-\$14
RR, TO, DL, FB, SB, L, D, LL, LLL,
LE, 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.

When we took on the job of writing this restaurant guide, we resolved to never eat at the same restaurant twice until after Minicon. The greatest hardship of this resolution is that we have not since eaten at **Mi Trieu Chau**.

Trieu Chau is your typical no-atmosphere great-food very-cheap family Asian restaurant. There are two, actually, but the menu is exactly the same. We knew this was the default fannish Vietnamese restaurant when Karen, picking up a takeout order, encountered Will Shetterly and Emma Bull on their way out the door, and inside, Peter Toluzzi picking up his own takeout. It seems as if we’ve eaten at the Trieu Chau in the Hi-Lake shopping center with just about everybody in local fandom at one time or another. It’s our favorite Vietnamese restaurant, probably because the pho is always so good.

They have a few pages of Chinese dishes, but we usually head straight for the Vietnamese page. Karen generally gets the pho; Bruce is more likely to order a *bun* dish (rice vermicelli), which is so good that you'll regret you're not hungry enough to eat both. We also get an order of spring rolls to start, which are fine, though we like them with cilantro instead of parsley. Actually, we've never had anything bad there. And our vegetarian friends like it a lot, too.

Kinhdo, with locations Uptown and in Richfield, is favored by our vegan correspondents for their tofu spring rolls. Karen thinks their food is greasy and average, so we don't generally eat there. Others recommend the curried beef or the beef and potatoes.

The **Saigon Uptown** restaurant on 38th and Grand Ave. S. is another of our favorites. Karen fondly recalls it as the site of her first-ever fannish dinner expedition. 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
338-4238

Vietnamese

Trieu Chau

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

Vietnamese

Sidewalk: P-2

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

Trieu Chau

2550 Nicollet Ave S, Minneapolis
W 26th St & Nicollet Ave
870-3727

Vietnamese

Sidewalk: P-3

RL, TO, BW, L, D, NCC, GD

Kinhdo

2755 Hennepin Ave S, Minneapolis
W 28th St & Hennepin Ave S
870-1295

Vietnamese, Chinese

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2

Zagat's: D-18, S-10, F-13, P-\$10

RR, TO, FP, B, L, D, GG

Saigon Uptown

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

Vietnamese

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2

Zagat's: D-20, S-12, F-18, P-\$10

TO, FP, BW, L, D, MS

Saigon

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

Lotus Uptown

3037 Hennepin Ave S, Minneapolis
 W Lake St & Hennepin Ave S
 825-2263

Lotus

113 W Grant St, Minneapolis
 LaSalle Ave & W Grant St
 870-1218

Vietnamese

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-20, S-12, F-18, P-\$10
 TO, FP, BW, L, D, MS, NCC

Vietnamese

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-17, S-11, F-15, P-\$10
 RL, TO, BW, L, D,

Vietnamese

Sidewalk: Q-2, P-2
Zagat's: D-17, S-11, F-15, P-\$10
 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, during my waitress years, 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's an easier job. 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 suffices 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; they don't have time to linger. 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) 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 return 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, that is 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 do a good job making 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 eggy 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. Karen always orders basted eggs, even though she

knows 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 Grillés 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 à 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, they start serving dinner 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 (after meeting Toronto fan Hania Wojtowicz)

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 Leah 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 the South Minneapolis fan ghetto, and we didn't really touch on the suburbs or St. Paul. Nevertheless, our tour of the scene gave us some surprises.

The new restaurants delighted us. We're looking forward to getting back to Aquavit, The Local, and Oceanaire. These new players are all working hard on building their clientele, and we predict that the traditional "best" Twin Cities restaurants lists are in for a shake-up this year.

The cheapest ethnic places are wonderful. Some of the best food in town is in hole-in-the-wall places like Mi Trieu Chau or Tacos Morales—or restaurants slightly better: Village Wok, Saigon, and Me Gusta. The best ethnic restaurant in the Twin Cities, Gardens of Solonica, is a bargain. 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; the Local is also nicely priced.

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. In the Warehouse District alone there's Caffe Solo, J.D. Hoyt's, Linguini & Bob, and lots more. St. Paul's wonderful La Cucaracha has opened a branch on Hennepin Ave.; we never made it there. Perhaps next year.

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 "phenomenal." 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 Sidewalk and 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.

Sidewalk

- Q Quality Rating (1–5)
S Price Rating (1–5) Multiply number by \$5 for average price of a main course.

Zagat's

- 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

- P Price Rating

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

Bruce and Karen

- 24 Open 24 hours
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
R Romantic
RE Reservations Essential
RL Reservations Recommended for Large Parties
RR Reservations Recommended
SA Skyway Accessible
SF Smoke Free
SS Sit with Strangers
TO Take Out
TOO Take Out Only
VG Video Games
VP Valet Parking
W Waterfront



A Rune Press Publication