

Eat Cheap Coffee Shops

Coffee shops and their menus have come a long way. It used to be if you wanted a cup of coffee and something to eat, your food choices were limited to a cookie, a doughnut or a muffin.

Today, coffee shops are destinations to meet friends and business associates and their breakfast and lunch menus have expanded to accommodate these customers.

In this "Eat Cheap" installment, the *Times-News* reporters wanted to see what coffee shops offered for lunch. I wanted to see if those lunches were healthy. Let's see how well the team did.

- Jill Sherman

Chicken, hummus and avocado pita - \$5.35 Broadway Java, 510 Broadway Ave. S., Buhl

A small, square building beside Buhl's main thoroughfare, Broadway Java is painted a deep orange hue and dressed with flower pots and windowboxes. That worked to catch my eye as I passed through town at lunchtime.

Inside I found the standard, tasteful coffee shop reds and browns, accented with stone and wood and art glass - and, of course, a full espresso menu.

Lunch options, on the other hand, could be explained in one breath. Just pitas.

I chose the \$4.50 chicken breast pita (no whole wheat available yet), with shredded cheddar and all the veggies: romaine leaves, tomato, cucumber and red onion. I bypassed the standard condiments to add avocado for 50 cents and roasted red pepper hummus for 35 cents.

Yum. The hummus and avocado supplied just the right amount of goop. The vegetables were fresh, the pita soft, the chicken chunks surprisingly tasty. While its other meats are deli slices, Broadway Java buys its chicken as plain precooked strips, adds salt and pepper and warms them in the microwave.

I ate a delicious lunch of just the right size - definitely one to repeat. Who cares about a long lunch menu?

- Virginia Hutchins

Chicken, hummus and avocado pita

Living in Idaho for the past 4 ½ years, I have not discovered many restaurants that offer pita bread wraps. Pita bread originated in the Middle East and is soft, chewy and delicious. It is a great vehicle for a sandwich because it doesn't fall apart like thin wraps or flatbreads.

Virginia, I give you credit for requesting a whole-wheat option, even though it was not available. Americans do not get enough veggies in their daily diet. Therefore, add as many to a sandwich or an entrée as you can. There is no substitute for the vitamins, nutrients and fiber vegetables contain, so load up!

Ordering the chicken strips instead of the deli slices was a much healthier choice. Processed deli meats contain a lot of salt, sugar and saturated fat.

It is nice that Broadway Java offers hummus, a blend of chickpeas, tahini (sesame seed paste), lemon, garlic and salt, as a topping or a sandwich. Now Melissa and other vegetarians can eat there and feel satisfied with their meals.

Virginia, adding avocado to your sandwich adds richness and heart-healthy fat. Having healthy fats in your diet helps you feel satisfied so you do not crave bad fats such as french fries, potato chips, ice-cream or chocolate.

Since Broadway Java just recently added pita wraps to its menu, perhaps in the future it will add other sides besides chips.

Jill Sherman

Chef's salad and bagel - \$6.45

Caffe Mocha, 591 Addison Ave. W., Twin Falls

It's tough being vegetarian in this town.

Take Caffe Mocha, for example. The cute little shop has outdoor seating, locally made scones and an impressive drink menu.

And it has a decent lunch selection. Five choices of meat, six breads, five cheeses, but not enough veggies to hold up an animal-product-free sandwich. They come cold, too, and a cold cheese sandwich just doesn't do it for me.

So I ended up with a salad. The chef's salad comes with a choice of two meats (I passed), two cheeses (I picked provolone and Swiss), tomato, onion and sprouts. I had hoped for more vegetables, but they would have to do. Worried the salad wouldn't fill me up, I also ordered a toasted bagel with cream cheese. My husband ordered a roast beef sandwich on sourdough.

When our food arrived, I immediately had lunch envy. His sandwich was packed with meat, cheese, lettuce and tomato. My salad, while fresh, was just chopped lettuce, a bit of tomato and sprouts, a side of ranch and way too much cheese. Good thing I had my bagel.

While I ate my greens and envied my husband, I took in the atmosphere. The friendly barista chatted with customers and other employees. Other patrons read newspapers or chatted in the shade outside. I felt like a regular, even though it was my first time.

The lesson? Go to Caffe Mocha. Order a sandwich and enjoy yourself.

- Melissa Davlin

Chef's salad and bagel

Melissa Davlin, it is a challenge to be vegetarian not only in Twin Falls but anywhere. Some towns offer more options than others. Unfortunately, many restaurants don't offer hearty vegetarian meals and basically think vegetarians eat like rabbits. Lettuce can only go so far. Scanning a menu to see what you can add from other meals is a great way to make a meal more substantial.

It seems this menu was a tough one, but you made the most of it. Good thing you are not a vegan – a person who eats no dairy or animal products - or you would have really been in trouble.

Ordering a bagel with the salad made this a complete meal and probably helped you feel more satisfied. A whole-wheat bagel, if available, would have been a better choice.

Caffe Mocha will offer homemade soups this fall. So a cup of soup, depending on what kind, would have made this meal more substantial.

Melissa, I know we are in Idaho where ranch dressing is king, but ordering vinaigrette would lighten the saturated fat and cholesterol in this salad, especially since you had double cheese plus cream cheese on your bagel. However, kudos to you for ordering the ranch on the side. This helps control the quantity of dressing used.

Often people order salad to eat healthy, but the dressing and toppings they choose add unnecessary saturated fat, cholesterol and calories.

- Jill Sherman

Breakfast burrito - \$5.95

Gonzo's, 2102 Overland Ave., Burley

I'm going to risk sounding snobby and admit that I was skeptical at the prospect of a sandwich and coffee shop in a gas station.

But Gonzo's and the attached Bent Bean coffee shop are both pretty neat places to grab a bite to eat.

Situated at the back of Mr. Gas in Burley, Gonzo's greets customers with a stand of paper bags. Each paper bag has a type of sandwich listed at the top, like turkey, pizza, vegetarian or ham. Instead of ordering verbally, customers grab the paper bag that corresponds with their sandwich. Choices of vegetables, cheeses and condiments are printed underneath for customers to circle. When they're ready, they bring the bag to the cashier and pay.

I chose a breakfast wrap with egg, potato, cheddar, mushroom, onion, pepper and salsa. I settled into Bent Bean's cushy chairs and waited for my lunch to be delivered. The wait was fairly short for being in the middle of a lunch rush - within 10 minutes, I had my breakfast burrito, presented in the very bag I had placed my order on.

I enjoyed the wrap - it filled me up and tasted decent - but the ordering experience was the highlight. I also loved Bent Bean's atmosphere. Patrons lounged in couches or surfed the Web in high stools. The shop's large drink selection would have complemented the burrito nicely.

I might try the veggie sub next time I'm there and pair it with a smoothie from Bent Bean. One thing is for sure, though. There definitely will be a next time.

- Melissa Davlin

Breakfast burrito

Melissa, ordering by circling the ingredients on a paper bag is a great way to cut down on errors. The customer then gets what she wants and every sandwich is made fresh. I wish more restaurants made ordering that easy and accurate.

Gonzo's does offer a white and wheat option for every sandwich – so Melissa, circling the wheat option would have increased the fiber in this meal.

Gonzo's has plenty of fresh vegetables to choose from and it looks like you added plenty.

Choosing the healthiest lunch of this bunch was very difficult for me this time. Each lunch had good and bad aspects and I teetered between all of them many times. However, I am choosing this lunch because it seemed a bit more balanced between veggies, protein and carbohydrates.

This breakfast wrap is in the bag!

- Jill Sherman

Turkey sandwich - \$6.95

Rosebud's Deli, 137 Hardwood Lane, Bellevue

The proprietors of the new Rosebud's Deli - open a few months just off U.S. Highway 93 - definitely have a sense of humor.

A hand-calligraphed sign listing the beverage menu gives this for coffee: "Price depends on proprietor's mood and your attitude."

The proprietor's mood, when I was in, was good. Though I didn't inquire about coffee cost, the substitutions I asked for on my sandwich were cheerfully (if slightly inaccurately) accommodated.

From the menu's turkey sandwich - provolone or Swiss cheese, cream cheese, avocado, sprouts and turkey on a croissant - I asked for the cream cheese to be replaced with lettuce, pickle and tomato. Unfortunately, the avocado disappeared as well.

Though the menu described sides as chips and two cookies, I was pleasantly surprised to get chips and an amazingly delicious slice of watermelon instead.

None of the items on the cafe's lunch menu top \$7, though you could add to both your calories and your bill by getting one of the many chilled treats: malts, shakes, coffee, Italian sodas.

But I didn't cheat on the guidelines this time, as tempting as a huckleberry shake sounded. I didn't need to - the sandwich filled me up!

- Ariel Hansen

Turkey Sandwich

Ariel Hansen, I am so proud of you for substituting veggies for the cream cheese. Since the sandwich already had cheese and was served on a croissant - which is basically butter and flour - it helped lower the saturated fat and cholesterol in this meal. Too bad the staff forgot the avocado; it would have added the creaminess the cream cheese provided.

Rosebud's Deli does make homemade soups daily and offers a half sandwich and soup option. If you want a rich sandwich for lunch, a great way to get what you want and not overdo it is to order half a sandwich with soup or salad.

Ariel, it appears fate saved you from yourself. Watermelon was a great substitution for the cookies - even though you didn't ask for it. The fruit's sweetness balances the saltiness of the sandwich and chips. When one craves sweets after a meal, it indicates that the meal was too salty. Satisfying a sweet craving with fruit is a much healthier option than a sugar-filled dessert. Ariel, perhaps this is why you were able to exercise self-control and pass on the huckleberry shake.

- Jill Sherman

Taco Salad - \$6.99

Thunderbird Trading Post, 120 Main St., Hagerman

Outside Thunderbird Trading Post - a converted house with Old California-style architecture - dried peppers hung from the eaves and birdhouses from the towering sycamore. A dog snoozed the afternoon away among clay flowerpots. Trees shaded the tables on a streetside patio that somehow managed to pose as an intimate courtyard.

This, I thought, is a coffee shop with character. That small garden at the front door had to be a good sign.

And I wasn't disappointed.

Thunderbird's interior was crowded with an interesting mix of memorabilia, magazines, books and Southwestern kitsch - like the skull and horns above the mantel, and a plastic cactus. Mismatched furniture outfitted several small rooms, one with customers' signatures covering its orange walls.

From a menu written in colored chalk I chose the large taco salad, with chicken.

It arrived in a heavy, straight-sided bowl - more like a dog dish than anything else that came to mind. But the setting had prepared me for surprise, and I charged into a filling meal of black beans, corn, lightly spiced chicken, cheese, olives, tomatoes, tortilla chips, respectable chunks of red cabbage and a mix of greens, including dark leaves. I made good use of the squeeze bottle of salsa and left the sour cream alone.

I probably could have filled up on the small version of Thunderbird's taco salad, available for a couple of dollars less. But I was hungry after a morning's reporting in the sun and don't regret leaving only a few chips in the bottom of the dog bowl.

No, I didn't lick it out.

- Virginia Hutchins

Taco Salad

Virginia Hutchins, taco salads are so appealing because they combine all the tastes and textures we crave- salty, crunchy, creamy and cool. Serving the taco salad in a "dog bowl" is much healthier than the deep-fried shell traditionally used by many restaurants.

In the last "Eat Cheap" installment, Virginia wondered what I had against cheese. When trying to eat healthier, removing cheese from an item is the easiest way to cut down on the saturated fat and cholesterol without compromising the meal. It could have been omitted in this dish, too.

Virginia, using Thunderbird Trading Post's homemade salsa instead of sour cream was a great way to lighten this dish and increase its veggie count. If you wanted the creaminess of sour cream without the saturated fat, cholesterol and calories, you could have substituted the shop's guacamole.

This taco salad consisted of a lot of great greens and veggies. But you could have ordered it with just the homemade black beans or the chicken, instead of both, since there was so much protein in this dish.

This taco salad looked delicious and I can understand why you ate the whole thing. Dogs would be so lucky to find this in their bowls.

- Jill Sherman