

Eat Cheap: The Finale

Yep, we've learned tons about nutrition from Jill Sherman Skeem. Jill, of course, is the health counselor who has evaluated all of our Eat Cheap selections as we sought out dozens of Magic Valley's under-\$7 restaurant meals.

Sometimes we scored pretty well in her nutritional estimation. Sometimes we stank. Always we resolved to do better next time. After all, Jill was watching.

But this time, for the final installment of our series, we're featuring meals that we eat when nobody's looking. The real Matt. The real Steve. The real Virginia. And those favorite lunches we order again and again.

Turkey Sandwich

Plum Natural, a pleasant little organic deli and grocery on Twin Falls' Main Avenue East, is a few minutes' walk from the newspaper office. Naturally, I'm a regular.

A couple of my co-workers have dismissed Plum Natural's sandwiches as too skimpy on the meat, but to my thinking the proportions are perfect. My standby is the Cajun-style turkey (no hormones, preservatives, additives or fillers) with provolone and Cajun mayo (not too plentiful), on organic Italian whole wheat.

Even when I alter those choices, I end my order with this refrain: "All the veggies except pickles and hot peppers." What that gets me is lettuce, olives, tomatoes, onions, sweet peppers and sprouts, with a few carrot sticks on the side. That's all organic, too – and supplied in generous amounts.

So the assembled sandwich is enormous, and I generally resort to a fork before I finish it off. The Cajun spice of the meat and mayo add interest to those big bites of vegetables. A lovely combination. .

Tempura with miso soup

Sushi Tokyo's Japanese décor- well planned, with no jarring elements- creates a surprisingly serene spot inside the Centre Pointe Plaza strip mall. That fact and the owner's unmatched hospitality make the Twin Falls restaurant one of my favorites. By habit, I generally bypass the sushi menu in favor of tempura or teriyaki.

For a simple and delicious lunch that's easy on the stomach, I order the shrimp and vegetable tempura appetizer (\$4.95) and a bowl of miso soup (\$1.50).

The tempura appetizer-served without the salad, soup and rice that come with a more expensive lunch special-features an impressive variety of veggies: mushroom, onion, carrot, zucchini, long green bean, green bell pepper, sweet potato and pumpkin, with two huge shrimp. It's all lightly battered, then fried in soybean oil. The accompanying

dipping sauce is made of ginger, sugar, soy sauce and fish powder; a little goes a long way.

The soup, with a few noodles and green onions added to the miso, is warm and comforting on a winter day. Who knew fermented soybeans could be so appealing?

Drunken noodle

There are plenty of places in Magic Valley to get a good lunch under \$7, as I've learned reporting our Eat Cheap series. But there aren't many restaurants where you can get that lunch served over a white tablecloth.

Prasai's Thai Cuisine- my favorite Twin Falls restaurants- is such a place: great, affordable food, excellent service and a classy, quite atmosphere.

My favorite meal is the drunken noodle dish. I'm a person who likes to order something different each time I visit a restaurant, but Prasai's is my exception.

I can't get enough of the pan-fried noodles with spicy green chilies, tomatoes and basil. My wife thinks I have a problem.

The meal comes with your choice of meat. I waver between chicken and pork, but I settled on pork during my most recent visit.

The spiciness of this dish depends on who's in the kitchen that day, so those with an aversion to hot food may want to order this dish with caution. Prasai's will accommodate any taste, however, if you simply ask that your dish be prepared with fewer chilies.

I like my drunken noodles fiery hot and sometimes request a spicier version than what's on the menu. Either way, you can't go wrong.

Barbecue beef sandwich

When I get homesick, I head to Dale's Dogs.

I'm an Illinois native, and Dale's is about the only place in Twin Falls that makes old-fashioned Chicago fare just the way I remember it.

I've sampled about everything on the menu, and I haven't been disappointed yet.

Last time I stopped in, I ordered the barbecue beef sandwich meal: a giant fresh bun loaded with tangy barbecue beef, French fries and a drink.

Barbecue beef is not easily prepared. Too much sauce and the bun gets soggy. Not enough and you'll lose flavor.

Dale's does it just right. My bun was beginning to get soggy at the last bite.

My only complaint-and it's a minor one- is that nearly everything at the restaurant is served with fry sauce on the side. Now, I realize that the creamy pink substance is Idaho's signature sauce, and Dale's must satisfy the local clientele, but nobody in or from Illinois eats the stuff, especially me.

Give me a bottle of Heinz 57 any day. Add a bit of ketchup to the leftover drippings from the sandwich, and you've got a whole new meal if you spread it over your fries. Delish!

Gorgonzola and tomato salad

Caprese is an Italian word that means "from the island of Capri." It's also a name given to a dazzling variety of food.

Pizzas, sandwiches, salads- if it's truly Italian, or wants to be, it contains the classic caprese ingredients: basil, mozzarella and tomatoes, representing the green, white and red of the Italian flag.

That's significant because the central Italian province in which Capri is located. Campania, is the breadbasket of the country and the birthplace of many hearty and spicy dishes.

Campanese food has been embraced worldwide, and there are hundreds of riffs of its recipes- including *insalata caprese*. One of the more interesting variations I've tried is the gorgonzola cheese and tomato salad at Tomato's Italian Grill in Twin Falls.

It's made from tomatoes, basil, lettuce, red onions and carrots, in a house Italian dressing. But it's the gorgonzola, substituted for mozzarella, that makes it interesting.

Gorgonzola will never be mistaken for mozzarella. It's made from pasteurized cow's milk to which specialized bacteria and mold spores are added. The latter give gorgonzola a distinctive bite, and a surprisingly different taste when mixed with the *insalata caprese* ingredients.

Served in a large bowl, it's more than a satisfying meal.

Now we know what they like to eat....

Jill Sherman Skeem

“I thoroughly enjoyed my participation in the Eat Cheap Series, and I thank the *Times-News* reporters for being good sports with my feedback. I hope my suggestions helped you make healthier choices and discover meals at restaurants you might not have chosen previously.”

As this is the finale, it seemed appropriate for the reporters to pick their favorite lunches. After all, I picked mine in past articles. Let's see what they really like.

Dale's Dogs

Matt Christensen, you must be homesick a lot. It is interesting how food comforts our souls and helps us relive wonderful memories with just one smell or bite.

What can I say about this lunch? This is comfort food at its best. Every city has its specialty and Idaho has its fry sauce. Being from Ohio, I had no idea what it was either. Matt you can always pass on the fry sauce and request ketchup instead, which if you can believe, the U.S. Department of Agriculture considers a vegetable.

This lunch might not be the healthiest of the bunch but it was good for your soul. I hope it helped with your homesickness. Thank goodness Dales' Dogs is here for you.

Plum Natural

Virginia Hutchins, I wish there were more restaurants in Twin Falls like Plum Natural. I understand why this is one of your favorites. Every product it carries and serves is organic. People often think it is a vegetarian restaurant, but it is not.

The most important aspect to eating organic food is what you are *not* eating – growth hormones, antibiotics, synthetic pesticides and genetically modified organisms, to name a few. One way to improve your health quickly is to eat organic foods whenever possible. We nourish ourselves each day with the food we eat. The higher- quality food we consume, the better our health will be.

Virginia, I think your sandwich proportions were perfect. The more veggies you can add to a sandwich or meal the better.

It is hard to pick the healthiest lunch because these were all the reporters' favorites, but this lunch is hard to beat.

Tomato's Italian Grill

Steve Crump, what have they done with you? Are you sure this is your lunch? When I first saw this salad I was looking for the rest of the meal. Even though it has gorgonzola cheese on it, it is not satisfying enough by itself, especially since it is still cold outside.

Salads cool us off and are better eaten and often craved in the summer time. Many people start a diet and eat salad every day but find they are not satisfied. Then they eat something deep-fried to fill them up and satisfy their hunger. They then wonder why they can't stay on a diet.

In this case, salad would be better as a starter. A bowl of pasta with veggies would balance it nicely and keep you from being hungry an hour later.

Steve, I am happy salad is one of your favorite lunches - just save this one for hotter weather.

Sushi Tokyo

Virginia, I can see why this lunch would be one of your favorites. Tempura is so yummy and satisfying.

Tempura, which originated in Portugal, is a cooking method which vegetables and other foods are dipped into batter and deep-fried until golden and crisp. The batter actually steams the food and uses less oil than pan frying. Eating tempura is good for physical and mental activity. It gives us good-quality oil so we don't reach for French fries or potato chips.

When cooked properly, tempura should not be greasy but rather nice and crunchy, which is exactly how it is made at Sushi Tokyo. The important thing to know is what kind of oil is used. I am happy Sushi Tokyo uses soybean oil to deep-fry its tempura.

Dipping sauce is important because the soy sauce helps the body digest the fat. It must be used sparingly because it is salty, and consuming too much can create sweet and/or liquid cravings.

Miso soup is the Japanese equivalent to our chicken noodle soup. It is made from fermented soybeans and there are many varieties. Barley and brown rice miso aged 2 years or longer are the most medicinal. Unfortunately, the miso used in restaurants is not aged as long and often artificially. This is why the soup appears lighter in color and tastes saltier than soup made with aged miso.

Virginia, the only element missing in this meal is a grain. Even though it is white rice, a side of it would make this meal complete. Otherwise, this was a great lunch choice.

Prasai's

Matt, I was not surprised you picked Prasai's, because I know it is one of your favorite restaurants. In a past Eat Cheap installment, I chose a tofu dish for your lunch there. I am a little disappointed it did not become your favorite.

However, the drunken noodle dish you love is filled with veggies and rice noodles, and the pork is a nice accent in this meal. Spices do increase the body's circulation, which might be one reason you like your food so hot and spicy.

Matt, I am glad one of your favorite lunches has vegetables and a form of rice in it. Perhaps there is hope for you after all!