

Eat Cheap: Mini-Cassia

It's lunchtime in Mini-Cassia. You need something cheap, quick and tasty, and you can't stomach yet another meal of the same old fare you usually turn to.

Lucky for you, three Times-News feature writers sought out restaurant lunches around Minidoka and Cassia counties priced at under \$7, not including tax or tip.

Then we asked a local health counselor, Jill Skeem, to rate our choices - and to offer insight on getting a bigger nutrition bang for the dining-out buck.

Cheesy fries and strawberry sundae • \$5.50

Cathy's Kitchen, 530 E St., Rupert

I walked into Cathy's Kitchen on a mission.

My editor, Virginia Hutchins, has won almost every nutrition challenge for Eat Cheap. She rubs it in every single time, and I wanted to put that goody-goody in her place.

So I sat down in one of the Rupert restaurant's comfy bench seats, passed on the soda and instead ordered water. I was off to a great start!

I scoured the menu for the healthiest choices. I was too late for their delicious-looking breakfasts, and I'm not a meat eater, so I skipped the affordable burger baskets.

That left me with the sides and desserts. I considered the salad, but in my experience diner greens are usually wimpy and unappetizing. So I went with the second-healthiest option - French fries smothered in cheese with a side of ranch dressing.

My mother always told me that French fries are healthy - fries are made from potatoes, and potatoes are vegetables. Mom is also a big fan of cheese and ranch dressing - they're chock-full of calcium, she said. Nutrition has never tasted so good!

The fries (\$2.75) were cut thick and tasted fantastic. I made sure to put extra calcium-filled ranch on my fries to impress health counselor Jill Skeem, who doles out the healthiest-meal awards.

I felt pretty confident in my snack choice's health benefits, but I really wanted to secure my inevitable victory. I ordered dessert - a large ice cream sundae with strawberry topping (\$2.75). I snagged my fruit serving for the meal in the most yummy, sugar-filled way possible.

As I attacked my giant sundae, I had a chance to enjoy the homey, no-frills atmosphere. Cathy's Kitchen was packed with locals. The friendly waitress called everyone by their first names, lending a familiarity to the cafe and reminding me of the restaurants my dad frequents.

In the end, the huge sundae defeated me. I surrendered before finishing it and, following the locals' lead, left a big tip. I was positive I had ordered the most healthy meal possible.

So bring it on, Hutchins.

- Melissa Davlin

Garden Spud with mushrooms • \$7

Stevo's, 290 S. 600 W., Heyburn

Stevo's isn't easy to find - the directions on Google have the street numbers reversed, and the only sign is on the building itself.

Located just north of Burley across Interstate 84, the restaurant is obviously popular. The menu is the same for lunch and dinner, and when I left after my meal, the dinner rush had people lined up literally out the door.

Predictably, the service was a little slow, but I don't blame the waitresses, who were bustling.

Much of the fare within the Eat Cheap budget was diner-standard: burgers, sandwiches and salads. What stood out were the Super Spuds, 12-ounce baked potatoes with a variety of toppings.

I chose the \$6 garden spud, which featured grilled pieces of a garden burger. For a dollar more, I added one of my favorite ingredients, grilled mushrooms.

The menu noted that the spuds are topped with cheese, but didn't specify which variety, so I asked the waitress. Her description brought to mind the sort of over-processed cheese sauce that comes on movie theater nachos, so I opted for simple shredded cheeses instead.

To keep my meal a little balanced, I didn't add the butter or sour cream that came on the side, and I didn't finish the entire potato.

The garden burger was packed with brown rice and other wholesome ingredients, and combined with the mushrooms and cheese, was surprisingly tasty.

I would have liked a side of steamed vegetables or a small salad, but the budget just didn't allow it. Sorry, Jill!

- Ariel Hansen

Fish sandwich and salad • \$4.95

Henry's at the Drift Inn, 545 F St., Rupert

Approaching Henry's at the Drift Inn moments before noon, my lunch companion and I saw other pedestrians making beelines for the door. We claimed the last available table on the lounge side of the building, leaving just open seats at the bar. Soon the staff was seating customers in the dining room, normally open in the evening.

No wonder the place is popular.

The Drift Inn is a beautifully restored historical building, a former bank on the Rupert Square. The lounge, with wood floor, high ceiling and squash-colored walls, feels like a classy pub. Nautical decor overshadows the beer signs, and though televisions occupy every corner of the room, gorgeous tall windows provide alternatives for the eye.

I ordered a meal of golden, deep-fried cod strips, offered with a salad and a choice of fries or tots. For the latter - thinking I might get some whole grain - I substituted a cornmeal bun that caught my eye elsewhere on the menu. The notably friendly server obliged.

With balsamic vinaigrette on the side, the salad was simple: mostly lettuce, with token bits of carrot, cabbage and tomato. The cornmeal bun - which turned my two strips of cod into a sandwich - was whiter than I'd hoped but flavorful nonetheless. With a big, dark-green lettuce leaf, it made for a sandwich that just cried to be gobbled down.

- Virginia Hutchins

Turkey panino • \$6.50

Sage Mountain Grill, 225 N. Main St., Albion

It was a chilly midafternoon last month when I pulled into Albion, on the hunt for something light but filling.

Seated in the empty Sage Mountain Grill by a friendly waitress, I immediately noticed the rustic atmosphere, with wood-paneled walls, animal mounts and hanging lamps decorated with antlers.

Though the burgers looked tasty, I was immediately drawn to the turkey panino, which layered turkey, cheese, tomato pesto and pickle slices on grilled bread. Pickles on the side are common, but it's not often that I find them layered into a sandwich. I'm a pickle lover, so I was pleased.

I had a choice of potato products as a side - fries, tater tots or chips - and opted for fries. They turned out to be excellently cooked, with crispy bits of skin that broke up the potato texture.

As I waited for my sandwich to arrive, a few customers trickled in. There was a friendly couple who chatted with me about their day in the snow, and a few quiet men who sat in the lounge to watch football on the flat-screen TV.

The sandwich was the right mix of crispy on the outside and melty on the inside, and if I hadn't been midafternoon hungry, I wouldn't have been able to finish it.

With an interesting and varied menu, the Grill is a gourmand's jewel in Albion's small crown. Unfortunately, the restaurant is closed due to damage from a Feb. 2 kitchen fire.

The owners estimate the restaurant will reopen by the beginning of April, with improvements in both the kitchen and dining rooms. The menu will be similar, and they may add new items based on feedback from customers - including additional panini.

- Ariel Hansen

Chow mein and steamed rice • \$5.15

Shon Hing, 109 E. Main St., Burley

When I was a child, I judged Chinese restaurants on one thing: their fried rice.

It didn't matter if the restaurant was spotless, the service 5-star, the selection unbeatable. If the fried rice was sub-par, I turned up my nose. If it had peas mixed in, I blacklisted the place.

Although I still feel the same way about peas, my tastes have matured. So I was excited to see what Shon Hing had to offer.

The Burley Chinese restaurant peeks out from a corner at Main Street and Overland Avenue. Patrons packed the place during lunch, so I expected the meal to take a while.

Still, I felt a little frustrated when it took 15 minutes for someone to take my order. When a waitress finally came by, I tried to stay true to my juvenile self by ordering fried rice, but she informed me that it all came with pork - a no-no for me. Disappointed, I settled for vegetarian chow mein and steamed rice.

While service was initially slow, I received my food almost immediately. I put a little sweet-and-sour sauce on the steamed rice to give it a touch of flavor and dug in.

My disgruntlement evaporated with the first taste. The chow mein's crunchy celery, soft sprouts, mild onions and crisp noodles combined perfectly for a satisfying lunch. I finished every bite and felt satisfied, not stuffed.

The message inside my fortune cookie read: "A friend's advice is invaluable." So take my advice, friends. Go to Shon Hing and enjoy the fantastic food, but think twice if time is an issue.

- Melissa Davlin