

## A health counselor's choices for 'Eat Cheap'

In this "Eat Cheap" installment, Features Editor Virginia Hutchins asked me to pick five of my favorite under-\$7 lunches in the Magic Valley for reporters to review. People are often surprised that I do eat out, but everyone needs a break from their cooking. Even me.

Since the reporters are drawing straws to choose who eats at which restaurant, I will have to wait and see who gets the tofu. I know Steve Crump and Matt Christensen will fight to be the lucky one for that lunch.

It is important to know that with a little thought, you can still eat out and make healthy choices. I hope this makes it easier for you the next time you dine out. Your body will thank you.

### Jill's picks

Sometimes we make her proud. More often, our choices of cheap restaurant meals earn criticism from Jill Sherman Skeem. xxx xxDon't blame her. We know very well we could do better on the nutrition front.

So this time, we asked Jill, a local health counselor, to point out five of her favorite under-\$7 restaurant lunches in Twin Falls. Then we drew straws to dispatch feature writers to those restaurants, order Jill's favorites and tell you what we thought of her picks.

Now, we'll welcome your suggestions again. (Because nutrition, after all, competes with cost, taste, service and setting in most folks' dining-out decisions.)

For the next installment of Eat Cheap, we'll peruse the valley's grocery deli counters. You can nominate your favorite deli counter fare anywhere in Magic Valley, priced at under \$7, not including tax or tip. E-mail your suggestions to [virginia.hutchins@lee.net](mailto:virginia.hutchins@lee.net) with "Eat Cheap" in the subject line.

### Maggie's Bakery and Cafe

This little cafe is like stepping into a European bakery. Maggie Watte offers sandwiches, quiches, salads, soups and the most amazing assortment of cookies, cupcakes, breads and cakes I have ever seen. The most unbelievable fact: Every item is made from scratch, including her soup stock.

When Maggie first opened, she alternated her salads. But since they have become so popular, she now offers certain ones daily. The barley salad with tomatoes and herbs is one of my favorites. It contains pearl barley, scallions, grape tomatoes, chives and parsley and is tossed with her olive oil-based balsamic vinaigrette.

Maggie prides herself on not using any additives, preservatives or mixes. I recommend eating a homemade item, even one of her delicious looking desserts, over one made from a mix. The body knows how to handle standard ingredients such as butter, cream and eggs but has a harder time with chemicals and preservatives.

Barley is one of the world's oldest grains and comes in two forms, hulled and pearl. (Not to be confused with pearled barley, a milled form of the grain where most of the vitamins and minerals have been removed.) More people should incorporate barley into their diets. It can be easily added to salads, soups and stews.

I wish more restaurants made homemade items, but it seems in our fast-paced world that is becoming a thing of the past.

## **Toro Viejo**

The variety of healthy entrees and side dishes at Toro Viejo makes it easy for me to still enjoy Mexican food. The lunch I choose is the veggie enchiladas — steamed carrots, mushrooms, broccoli and zucchini rolled in corn tortillas, topped with Toro's salsa de Mazatlan, served with white rice and cholesterol-free beans and garnished with Monterey Jack cheese and sour cream. Before anyone says "WHAT?" — I order this meal without the cheese and sour cream garnishes.

You do have a choice between pinto and black beans. Since most people are more familiar with pinto beans, I will have the reporter order black beans instead. All beans are a great source of protein and fiber.

As at most Mexican restaurants, chips and salsa are automatically served upon a customer's arrival. However, I am going to have the reporter refuse the chip basket so he or she will have enough room for the meal. Besides, chips and salsa are like Lay's Potato Chips — you can't just eat one!

I like this dish because it has corn tortillas — which are made without lard — contains plenty of crispy and still crunchy vegetables and is served with rice and beans. It is a complete meal with the right amount of protein.

So, if you are watching what you eat, it is nice to know you can still dine at a Mexican restaurant and eat in a healthy way.

## **Taste of Thai**

Taste of Thai was one of the first restaurants I patronized when I moved to Twin Falls and to this day remains one of my favorites.

It has many dishes I enjoy and on occasion will even prepare a dish I create not on the menu. One of my favorite lunches is the Thai noodle soup with tofu as the "meat" choice. I request the vegetarian version. This dish arrives in a large noodle bowl filled with broth, rice noodles, bean sprouts and scallions and is loaded with vegetables such as green cabbage, snow peas, carrots, mushrooms, broccoli and bamboo shoot slices. It's garnished with fresh cilantro. Roasted garlic is also a garnish for this dish, but I find it overpowering so omit it normally. I will have the reporter do the same.

Noodles are very relaxing, which is one of the reasons I like this entree, plus the vegetables have just the right color and crunch. Remember, the broth just flavors the noodles and is not soup, so consume only a small amount because it can be salty and leave you craving liquids or sweets.

Taste of Thai offers a variety of healthy options and accommodates special requests, making it easy for me to eat there.

## **Plum Natural**

I wish more restaurants were like Plum Natural Organic Market & Deli — totally organic, which means its food is free of hormones, antibiotics, additives, colorings and synthetically compounded chemicals, fertilizers, herbicides and fungicides.

Some people think it is also vegetarian, but it is not. Plum Natural offers soups, sandwiches, salad bar and a daily entree.

Since we are in the heat of summer, I choose the salad bar. It has a good size bowl to fill with your choice of plenty of fresh vegetables. However, I want the reporter to avoid the eggs and cheese to keep the saturated fat down and to choose the red onion, peas, olives, mushrooms,

carrots, broccoli, cauliflower and any other vegetables he likes. Plum Natural has freshly ground toasted sesame seeds, which are a great source of calcium and would garnish this salad nicely. All of the dressings are homemade. I prefer and will recommend the reporter choose lemon-garlic vinaigrette.

A warm whole-wheat roll comes with the salad bar, making this meal complete. If Steve draws this lunch, I hope his body can handle a salad without ham, cheese, bacon and Ranch dressing! We will see if Lady Luck is on his side.

With the constraints of this assignment I can select only a lunch that is a staple on the menu, and Plum Natural changes soups daily. However, all their soups are made without cream, milk or cheese so they are lower in saturated fat and always a good choice.

Eating organic foods is much healthier because of what is not in your food, plus you receive more nutrients from the food you eat.

### **Crowley's Soda Fountain**

Who would have thought this unassuming soda fountain would offer wraps that contain brown rice, grilled portobello mushrooms and homemade caramelized onions? I certainly didn't but was pleasantly surprised when I saw it on the menu.

The wrap I order is the portobello chicken wrap ... except, I order it without the chicken. This wrap contains chicken, caramelized onions, brown rice, portobello mushrooms and balsamic vinaigrette. You get your choice between a tomato-basil, spinach or garlic-herb wrap. I prefer the tomato-basil, but the reporter can pick another.

The wrap comes with your choice of chips, cottage cheese or green salad. I prefer the green salad which is made with a mix of organic and nonorganic greens, tomatoes, cucumbers, croutons and cheese, which I omit. I also request the balsamic dressing on the side so I can control the amount I use.

Crowley's is one of the few local restaurants that offer brown rice. It is the mother of all whole grains because it has an ideal proportion of complex carbohydrates to protein and is a great source of fiber and nutrients. This wrap is yummy — a great way to add brown rice to your life.

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### **Thai noodle soup - Price: \$6.50**

Food expert Jill Sherman Skeem mentions in her column today that when she moved to Twin Falls, Taste of Thai on Pole Line Road became a favorite restaurant.

Something similar happened to me when I moved here just over a year ago from Iowa. I'd never had Thai food before, and since then, I eat more of the spicy stuff when I'm out than anything else.

Our similarities end right there, though. Jill is a tofu nut. I like pork. So when she instructed I order the Thai noodle soup with tofu instead of meat, I groaned. She's coaxed me into eating tofu before, to my chagrin.

But, like last time, my worries turned out to be for nothing. The soup was excellent, even with the slippery soy substance. Tons of crunchy veggies: cabbage, snow peas, broccoli, carrots, scallions and bamboo shoots. Cilantro produced the dominant flavor, which gave the soup a light,

fresh taste. If you're going to eat soup during summer, this is the way to do it. The noodles, paper thin, were standard.

My only problem with this meal was logistics. The veggies were cut into pieces too large for a spoon. But you can't get much broth with a fork. I had to keep switching: A bite of veggies with the fork followed quickly by a slurp of broth via spoon. I'm sure it was comical to watch — but certainly a burden to accomplish.

Meat is available in Thai noodle soup, and, normally, the dish is served with garlic, which I omitted this time at Jill's request. I didn't miss either.

— Matt Christensen

### Barley salad and a cupcake - Price: \$6.75

My barley salad at Maggie's Bakery came packaged to go, but it's tempting to stay — thanks to antique furniture, blue-and-white pottery, pretty curtains, couches, bunches of dried lavender and an otherwise inviting environment. Not to mention the big jars of cookies, the heavily laden cake stands, the savory scones and the cupcakes positively shaggy with frosting.

The refrigerated display cases for all that baking are rather loud in the small cafe on Addison Avenue East, but there's more than enough charm to compensate.

My meal's grab-and-go packaging eliminated any wait, so within moments I was settled at a table with the barley salad (\$4.25) and a disposable cup of water (50 cents).

Herbs and vinaigrette added a mild zing to the salad, which was delicious. But the dish was also heavy on the barley and light on the tomatoes, which meant an awful lot of chewing. I didn't make it through quite all the barley before I felt like I'd earned dessert. (But the salad, you remember, was portable, so I saved the remnants for later. And you read what Jill Sherman Skeem said about Maggie Watte's no-preservative desserts.)

After much deliberation, I chose a \$2 coconut cupcake — the shaggiest in the case. Maggie warned me that the buttercream and cream cheese icing would be at its best if I waited for the cupcake to warm to room temperature.

Hardest thing I did all day.

— Virginia S. Hutchins

### Veggie enchiladas - Price: \$5.95

No decor could sufficiently brighten the previous restaurants that occupied Toro Viejo's Main Avenue North location. But the reintroduction of tall windows before Toro Viejo's opening helped make the formerly cavelike building a lively and inviting lunch spot.

Of course, vegetables on the menu don't hurt, either.

I dutifully declined the chips (but accepted the salsa and saved it for my meal) and ordered my veggie enchiladas without cheese or sour cream.

Ten minutes after ordering, I had my meal. The kitchen's white rice wasn't ready at the moment, the server said, so would this rice be OK? The rice on my plate — prepared with tomatoes, onions, garlic and chicken broth — looked delicious, so I didn't hesitate. But I'm grateful he asked before setting down the plate.

The carrots and broccoli in my enchiladas lived up to Jill Sherman Skeem's "still crunchy" promise. I found crispy celery in there, too. The black beans — which, happily, didn't taste salty — were topped with a tasty layer of tomatoes, onions, peppers and cilantro.

An altogether satisfying meal. And it produced none of the bloating that Mexican restaurants so often do.

— Virginia S. Hutchins

### Portobello chicken wrap and salad - Price: \$6.25

Decor at Crowley's Soda Fountain on Main Avenue South hasn't changed much since it opened in 1942. The pharmacy part of the family-owned business is gone, but a recent touch-up to the soda fountain by the third generation of Crowleys brought the shop back to its roots.

In fact, I couldn't help but imagine myself dining with a war-era crowd when I had lunch there recently. Lots of chrome, high decorative ceilings and a shining soda fountain.

The food, however, couldn't be farther from the 1940s. At the request of our eats expert Jill Sherman Skeem, I ordered the portobello chicken wrap, hold the chicken. I could choose the flavor of my wrap and went with spinach because it was the only wrap in stock that day.

My meal came with a salad, balsamic vinaigrette on the side. The thick and savory dressing was the highlight of this meal. It was sweet but not overpowering, spicy but not hot and tangy but not tart. I was pleased to learn the dressing is used for the sauce in the portobello wrap.

The main course was satisfying, though I wished I could have had chicken. The mushrooms, thick and al dente, almost convinced me I didn't need the meat.

But when I imagined what the wrap would have tasted like had the chicken been included, I found myself sorry it wasn't there. It would have balanced the flavors and textures of the soft mushrooms and starchy rice.

Despite the lack of chicken, my wrap was large, and I could not eat the whole thing. Judging from glances at tables near mine, large portions are the norm at Crowley's.

If you haven't been to Crowley's, you need to. Just seeing this slice of history from the inside is reason enough, but stay for lunch, get a soda or ice cream. You won't be disappointed.

— Matt Christensen

### Salad bar - Price: \$5.75

Lady Luck was indeed on my side at Plum Natural. I was able to garnish my salad with soy bacon bits.

My salad-bar lunch at the Main Avenue East restaurant was tasty, and as per instructions I skipped the eggs and cheese and garnished my lettuce with red onion, peas, carrots, beets and broccoli. Poppy seed dressing was on offer the day I visited, so I chose that.

And it was all filling enough that I skipped the roll.

I eat a fair amount of bagged tossed green salad from the supermarket, and the biggest difference I noticed about Plum Natural's salad was the lettuce — it was fresh. That's a pleasant change, and it reminded me that the whole appeal of green salad is supposed to be freshness.

I'm not sure I can go back to wilted iceberg lettuce. — Steve Crump