



Contributors

Stuart Vyse: In praise of cheap and local eats

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JUST DOWN the street from my office is a restaurant where I often eat an eggplant grinder for lunch. Like thousands of other neighborhood restaurants across America, the specialty is simple Italian food: grinders, pizza, pasta. The dining room is decorated with pictures of movie stars and famous athletes, and the plastic-coated tablecloths are red-and-white check. There is a small bar at one end, where people drink watery American beer and watch the day's sports contest on televisions mounted on the wall. The food will not win any awards, but it is dependable and cheap.

My income lets me eat in much fancier places, and I've enjoyed my share of expensive meals. I've paid more for a bottle of wine than most people pay for their monthly phone bill, and I've eaten dishes with names I could not pronounce and ingredients I had never heard of.

Fine dining can be a great pleasure, but the patrons of the best restaurants are a privileged group. At a five-star establishment, the only working-class people are the ones who cook the food and bring it to your table. When it comes to the everyday meal eaten out, I prefer a place where the person who waits on you could also afford to eat.

Americans eat out now more than ever before, but most of the inexpensive meals come from fast-food chains, where eating is an anonymous experience. Most of what you can see -- the menu, the staff uniforms, the decorations, the advertising campaign, and the food itself -- is sent through the corporate system; every McDonald's or Subway is the same as every other one. The people who work at these places tend to be young individuals who don't bother to make eye contact, because they are just passing through on their way to better gigs.

Americans have nothing equivalent to the neighborhood pubs of Britain. We do have the occasional corner bar, "where everyone knows your name," but more often than not our version of the local pub is a diner, or an Italian, Chinese, Indian, Mexican, or Thai restaurant. It is a privately owned, often family-operated business, with its own quirks, and in many cases it is run by an adult staff who have been working there for a long time.

At my little restaurant near work, I have been waited on by the same people for years, and they put my order in when they see me walk in the door.

Food tastes best when it brings people together. Go eat at your local deli, greasy spoon, or pizza place -- I've never eaten there, but I highly recommend it. When you order the turkey club, two-egg special, or pepperoni-and-mushroom, you will get more than a cheap meal. You might just get to know your neighbors.

Stuart Vyse is a professor of psychology at Connecticut College.