The Old Frying Pan May Soon Fade Away

By John Rico

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LET’S DINE OUT - Never in the history of the United States have the three words: “Let’s dine out” been so prominently used. This common 1979 trait comes about because the lady of the house who at one time worked over a hot stove, now has steady employment helping to bolster her husband's income.

You often hear the remark: “Boy, I found a good restaurant the other day.” I have always been skeptical of what people actually call a good restaurant. Does it mean the decor? Does it mean the quality of the food or service? Does it mean the price of the commodity as compared with the quality?

Having had the opportunity of eating out more than the average person, at times I am called upon to make suggestions as to where people could enjoy a meal. My answer to such a question is: “Try it yourself, because you alone must be the judge.”

I can remember as a youngster when many of us would gather at Sam Lum’s Sing Kee Chinese Restaurant on Dobbins Street. It was in that Corrugated iron building, with its meandering black chimney from the pot-bellied stove, that we rubbed elbows with bankers, farmers, doctors, all of them there for one purpose — to devour Sam Lum’s chow mein, rice, noodles or dried pork. Sam Lum had the only Chinese restaurant in Northern Solano County, and his fame as a chef brought people here from many surrounding communities.

There were the days when the Lyon sisters operated their open-air Casa Maria Restaurant on Merchant Street, with tables set beneath majestic fig trees. There were the meals served at Hotel Vacaville; at the Bridge Coffee Shop; Joe Rossi’s Valley Cafe.

The mortality rate in the restaurant business tops all others. Vacaville has seen them come and go.

In recent years the franchised fast food establishments have invaded the local scene. Figures from the State Board of Equalization show that at year’s end in 1978 there were 54 eating and drinking establishments within the city of Vacaville, doing a gross business of nearly $23 million. The city treasury benefitted from these sales by collecting $230,000 for local use.
The traveling public is responsible for much of the food sales at Vacaville restaurants. As a comparison, Fairfield had 77 eating and drinking establishments, doing a gross business of under $20 million.

Vacaville residents cannot complain about variety in their eateries. There’s food for every taste; every pocketbook. There’s the decor of the Nut Tree, and there’s the simplicity of the many hamburger and french-fry dispensers. Just what would philanthropist Andrew Carnegie think of his Vacaville library building now being used as a unique restaurant?

It was not too many years back that you could not buy a pizza here, but that came to pass when Pietro Murdaca opened his Pietro’s on Cernon Street. You can buy Mexican and Japanese foods; along with Chinese and Kentucky Fried chicken. There’s a sit-down restaurant or a take-out food establishment in practically every downtown block, and the traveler along busy Interstate 80 finds a wide selection of eating places here.

Personally, I’m a steak and potato, and spaghetti and meatball man. The mere sound of escargot, sweetbreads, frog legs, brains and oysters, seem to curb my appetite. I have been told there are only four fundamental sensations in food tasting which comes about when the food contacts the gustatory nerves. These sensations are salt, sweet, sour and bitter.

My father would impress on me, my brothers and sisters, that the greatest joy to be derived out of life is food. That’s why I have always preferred to eat the foods which were to me the most palatable.

Too often some restaurants have a tendency of abandoning the plain English language and replacing it with confusing words, using a subterfuge. Why cannot a person go into a restaurant and find listed ham hocks and beans; or sowbelly?

One of my greatest problems is going into a Chinese restaurant and attempting to interpret the menu. My latest experience was at the Hong Kong on Merchant Street, and after having ordered the typical chow mein, rice, etc., owner Sue Leung came over and generously informed our party that she had cancelled the order and was giving us the food which she preferred. From that experience we learned a lesson — let Sue do the ordering.

Although Vacaville, at year-end count had 54 eating and drinking establishments, that number is continually being increased. There’s Carl’s Jr. on Peabody, and Long John Silver on Hamburger Hill. You would think that with all the franchised eating establishments in Vacaville, the list would soon be exhausted, but fear not, there’s over
200 available.

These many eating establishments are a convenience. When the wife comes home from a long day at the office, you can take her out to dine, or you can jot down to the nearest fast food dispensary and later enjoy a hamburger and some french fries around a romantic candle as you sit and eat off the coffee table in front of your TV set.

And as you eat that hamburger, you may want to assess your expenditure as being a part of the $23 million spent here last year for food — and drinks.