

Good Food, Good Times and Bad Fat

Want a Meal to Bond Over? Stay Away From the Salad Bar

By JOEL KELLER

NEW JERSEY is a greasy state, food-wise. It has more varieties of inexpensive cholesterol-boosting foods than almost anywhere else on the planet.

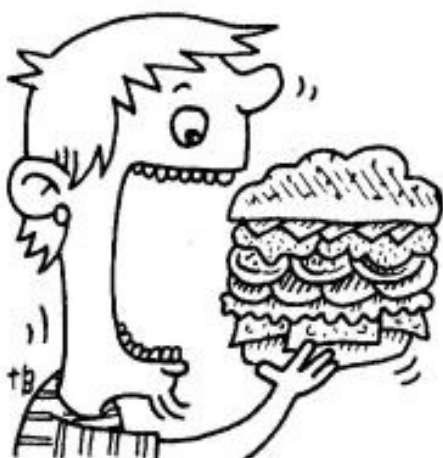
If you're hankering for something that's bad for you, from Taylor ham to Texas wieners to a hoagie from Wawa, you can find it in the Garden State.

Morris County, however, is relatively greaseless. Sure, my home county has its share of diners, bagel shops and hot dog emporiums. For most of my time here, though, there hasn't been a signature eatery, a place for expatriate Jerseyites to make pilgrimages to once a year during the holidays, or somewhere that gets calls from soldiers in Iraq looking for airlifted goodies from home. There was no Rutt's Hut, no Whitehouse Subs, no Hot Dog Johnny's to occupy every one of my meals and harden my arteries.

Until about two years ago, that is. That's when Jimmy Buff's opened in East Hanover, a mere 10-minute ride from my apartment.

This was not good news for me. Not that I dislike Jimmy Buff's; in fact, I love it. For the uninitiated, Buff's serves the Paterson-Newark delicacy known as the Italian hot dog, a concoction that consists of a fried hot dog, onions, peppers and potatoes (often fried in the same oil as the dog), all stuffed into a pizza roll the size of a baby's head.

I usually ordered what is known as a double combo, which has one hot dog and one sausage under the accompanying fried veggies. Usually



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after eating a combo, I'd either fall asleep or be overcome by what I call "carb sweats," when my blood sugar would shoot up momentarily and give me a hot flash. Suffice to say, a Buff's dog will never receive the "Atkins Approved" seal.

Because the closest Buff's was 30 minutes away, I made the trip only once or twice a year. But now, it's right smack in the middle of my Saturday errand circle, making it a perfectly valid lunch option while I'm driving between Borders and Costco.

Once the word "Buff's" enters my consciousness around noon, it takes all the mental and physical strength I can muster not to automatically steer myself toward that double combo. If I end up at the diner, or even Taco Bell, I consider it a small victory.

But it doesn't end there. All I have to do is mention the place to certain friends, co-workers or other enablers, and the next thing I know, I'm keeping potato slices from falling on my shirt.

Case in point: A few months ago, I was working in Parsippany and decided to skip the cafeteria to go out to lunch with some colleagues. We were heading to my car, intent on getting sandwiches, when I casually men-

tioned that there was a Jimmy Buff's nearby.

"Really?" said Eddie, a co-worker whose body type can most accurately be called Ruben(Studdard)esque. "Man, I used to go the one in Irvington all the time when I was a kid. We've got to go."

So there we were, crammed into my little hatchback, heading up Route 10 to a rendezvous with a thousand calories of starch and mystery meat.

The whole way up, I was hearing a strange voice in the back of my head. It sort of sounded like a combination of my doctor and my parents. "Your cholesterol's already at 240!" the voice would shout. "You know you can't eat this junk. Turn the car around and get some sushi."

But I wouldn't listen. While my mind was saying "no," my lips were busy talking to the guys about Jersey's best places to eat, from the fire-pit hamburger places along Route 46 to the best place to get a steak.

That's half the reason I go to a place like Buff's. Yes, it's a grease-lover's paradise, but it's also a place to relive memorable meals of the past, ones that not only had great food, but fantastic company as well.

Maybe it was the time I took a long lunch and talked with my work buddies about game shows over pizza and beer, or some post-party fraternity sojourn to the local diner, or any number of significant events that would have never had as much meaning if they took place at some Denny's or McDonald's.

So while I was sitting with the guys, devouring my fourth double combo of the month, the guilt I felt was overridden by the satisfaction that another good memory was locked away in the vault.

I figure a few more points on the old LDL number are worth the good times.

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