

# Eating Out

By Alonzo Gristle

## An interim report— 16,422 dinners to go

"Many people who haven't been to Bruno's for years still remember it with great fondness, and motoring there last week, I couldn't help but think how the neighborhood must have changed."

Zenon Bubnoki  
Bruno's Cafe and  
Restaurant  
1421 Mt. Ephraim Avenue  
Camden, N.J. 08100

My dear Bubnoki,

Some days ago I notified my editor that the next article I planned to write for this column would concern itself with Bruno's Restaurant in Camden, of which you are the proprietor. The editor telephoned you to make arrangements for a photographer, at which time you reportedly told him you weren't interested in a public assessment of your food unless the critic was willing to spend 15 years or so to make a fair sampling.

Your suggestion intrigued me and I informed my editor that I, for one, was willing to spend the next 16,422 dinners at your place. Unfortunately, standards of good taste prevent me reporting his exact words, but it

was something to the effect that it might be difficult to explain to the business manager why all my expenses over such a long period of time were being incurred at one restaurant. He seemed very much convinced on this point, and I could find no way to dissuade him.

Still, there was the matter of public responsibility. The value of this column, if it has one, is to provide a few fragile guideposts to the unwary diner, who otherwise would stand to forfeit a good piece of his wallet for a meal he knows nothing about until he's eaten it. Although I have occasionally been accused of stretching a point, I try for an honest appraisal, without fawning to advertisers or zealous restaurateurs. Perhaps that is to a noble a principle for survival. It is certainly not the safer course, but at the heart of it, it is honest, which I am old-fashioned and foolish enough to believe is worth pursuing.



Photo by Jim Stewart

Then I wondered what I might have said about your restaurant. All of us know that it is something of a landmark, dating back to a time when it was known as "the Farmer's Hotel," a way station for travelers headed for the Camden Ferry. Your parents, Bruno and Anna Bubnoki, bought the place from the Betz Brewery, and the first dollar bill they took in, dated January 19, 1925, still hangs above the bar.

Over the years, they built the restaurant up into a business with a reputation for being one of the best eating spots in Camden, and many people visiting West Jersey Hospital across the street would make it a point to stop at Bruno's to have supper, or just to pass the time while a friend was dying across the street, or a baby was being born.

Many people who haven't been to Bruno's for years still remember it with great fondness, and motoring there

one evening last week, I couldn't help but think how the neighborhood must have changed. Mt. Ephraim Avenue is brightly lit, but the sidewalks are vacant and the back streets are dark and uninviting.

Still, Bruno's has a clean, if not cheery, look about it. Inside there is a long, polished bar and a large dining room with plain tables and stiff chairs and some paintings of antique cars and the stuffed heads of deer and caribou mounted on the walls.

My editor couldn't spare me for 15 years, but I did go ahead and have three meals there. Most of all, I was impressed by the prices. Almost everything is in the \$2 to \$4 range, while the most expensive meals on the menu are broiled lobster tails and the sirloin steak, both marked at \$5.95.

My first trip, I had a seafood combination (\$4.50), which consisted of one small lobster tail, a tender, though small, piece of flounder and a perfectly delicious crab cake.

The next visit I tried the sirloin steak (\$5.95), which was one-inch thick and of good size, fairly tender and well-cooked.

Finally came a pot roast (\$2.75), which was two large but thin slices of tender meat covered with a nice stick-to-the-ribs beef gravy.

Several excursions into the appetizers produced a bland

egg roll with shrimp (65 cents) and a very satisfying shrimp cocktail (\$1.95) containing five large and firm shrimp, accompanied by tangy sauce.

A cup of beef noodle soup du jour (40 cents) was thick with beef chunks and filled to the surface with chewables, while a cup of snapper (also 40 cents) was a very rich broth accompanied by a small cream jar of sherry.

In the line of vegetables, the pickled beets and mixed vegetables were ordinary, while a cheese potato puff proved to be a pleasant diversion, though not very cheery, and the best of the lot was the stuffed potato, a kind of spiced mashed potato baked in a tinfoil boat.

The desserts were nothing to rave about. A bowl of rice pudding was too thick to be creamy, and a slice of apple pie had a doughy crust and more goo than apples.

Hoping for the best, I persisted in ordering a cup of coffee at the end of each meal, but each cup proved worse than the last, and the very last was bilge.

Still, there's a lot to make up for, and when you average it all out over 45 years, I have no doubt that Bruno's will come out being one of the finest spots in Camden.

Sincerely,  
A. G.

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