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Discount Delectables

By Chris Sherman - 8/1/2009

Dinner at Vernona's in Sarsaota was pure Ritz-Carlton, featuring the clever tricks of a smart chef, the luxury of organic local ingredients and polished service: Salmon poached perfectly, crisp squash blossoms stuffed with goat cheese, and a gleaming pitcher to pour velvety bisque over Jonah crab and corn kernels for the signature popcorn bisque.

And it was \$25 for three courses.

The bargain was served during Savor Sarasota, a two-week promotion in June when dozens of restaurants mark down three-course menus at lunch for \$15 and dinner for \$25. "We see it as a friendly introduction to people who have never been to our restaurant," says chef Greg Howe. He strives to put first-rate food from the regular menu on the special, not cheapies.

The promotions are usually timed for off-seasons when business is slowest. This year, the restaurant economy is tougher than it has been, off more than 30% in many places. Slow periods are more frequent and longer — so are the promotions.

Miami Spice, Florida's first meal deal, is held three times this year, one month in the winter, one month in spring and for all of August and September. Prices are higher: \$22 for lunch and \$36 for dinner, but the menu is grander, with meals from 50 restaurants studded with the most expensive celebrity chefs.

The public perception of prices and bargains has changed too. While \$25 for a meal that might cost twice that at a great restaurant can still be a steal, for many consumers \$25 for a three-course dinner (before drinks, tax and tip) is a rare splurge, no matter the deal. A \$15 lunch of any quality is even less common.

So smart restaurants are adding special deals year-round. It's not a new idea: Many American restaurants used to include soup or salad in the cost of any meal (then came a la carte with prices of sides escalating to \$9 starters and \$8 desserts). Although European restaurants often post daily "menus" at several price points (15, 30 and 40 euros), Americans have reserved the "prix-fixe" for top-dollar tasting menus and other epicurean feasts.

When Savor Sarasota was over, the Ritz offered a summerlong deal of three courses for \$35 — and also split its Lucullan 12-course feast into separate parts: The bisque, foie gras, peach salad and sashimi for \$24; four entrees for \$42; and so on; plus nightly specials under \$20 where comfort dishes go upscale, modern and organic like meatloaf from local grass-fed beef.

Chef Cindy Hutson, who dishes out witty tropical fusion at Ortanique on the Mile in Coral Gables, says the first aim of Spice was to draw new diners, but a persistent slowdown demands more. "I won't discount quantity or cut portion size. I'll have to take a hit sometimes in food cost and change my menu more often, but I'll still run that three-course special. A full dining room is a happy dining room. I want the vibe to remain." That means lower check tabs and tips for the waitstaff, but they are busy.

At Talula, a small, warm place on Miami Beach, the Miami Spice spring specials included pork belly, palm heart salad, hanger steak with peanut butter mashed potatoes and a coffee-chocolate bread pudding. But chef Andrea Curto-Randazzo and other independent restaurateurs aren't sure of their strategy for the future. The first Spice brought in huge crowds. Now she has to weigh the cost (\$950 to participate) against the possibility that the appetite for Spice has been sated.

It may be that today's diners — and tomorrow's — are less interested in three-course meals than in a big choice of small dishes. "I see people eating appetizers for dinner," says Curto-Randazzo, so Talula has a number of tapas-style dishes under \$7 and may have more. Like Hutson, she wants regulars, not just "occasion" diners, but she knows that diners and restaurateurs are both in survival mode. "I get it. I've got three small children. I totally get it."

A summer menu at Pep's Island Grill in Tequesta brings back the old full-course diner at a recessionary price. The \$10 Real Deal: Fried zucchini, chowder or salad, then a choice of entrees from Cuban pork to shrimp or lamb chops, and mini apple cobbler a la mode. Big spenders can get a \$15 surf and turf with starter and dessert.

Creating new menus at lower price points for city promotions "is a challenge, a fun challenge," says the Vernona's Howe. It forces chefs, even at the Ritz, to be more value-focused, a principle they'll need all year.

"The fine dining paradigm has changed," Howe says. Whether the format is a three-course supper or a spectrum of small plates, dinners will be more casual. "The \$75 dinners aren't out there. "

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