

'Best \$5 Meal in Town'

Written by Patti Sells

Thursday, 05 March 2009 13:32



Keeping a close eye on costs allows Outlet Cafe to keep prices down, quality high for daily Blue Plate Specials.

Discounts on clothing and merchandise aren't the only great buys you can get at the VF Factory Stores of America mall in Sulphur Springs. The Outlet Cafe also offers great food at great prices with its \$5 Blue Plate Specials.

"It's the best \$5 meal in town," said Al Perez, owner of the Outlet Cafe, who offers 11 menu items for one great price. "It's the best value in town. It really is."

Hamburger steak, meatloaf and chicken Monterey, as well as hand-battered chicken fried steak that Perez says is the restaurant's "claim to fame," are each served with mashed potatoes, gravy, corn, green beans and a roll.

"Our chicken fried steak is a fresh cutlet, never frozen, hand-pressed, dipped in buttermilk then our own seasoned flour mixture, then its dipped again before we put it into the fryer. It's the best in town – anyone who's had it will tell you that."

Another Blue Plate Special is a Mexican combo that includes one cheese enchilada, one crispy beef taco, one chicken flauta, rice, beans, chips and hot sauce.

"We make our own chips and taco shells, too," Perez boasted, adding that he owned a taco stand at one time in Winfield. "We have the best taco salad. Everything is made right here. As small as my new place is, we haven't changed the way we do things."

In addition to the taco stand in Winfield, Perez has owned and operated five restaurants throughout the area over the past 15 years.

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The Knights Head Inn was his original restaurant on Main Street, and his reason for relocating to Sulphur Springs from Mesquite.

"It was just a fluke, really, how we got here," he said with a laugh.

Perez said he saw an ad for the building and drove to Sulphur Springs to check it out.

"Sure enough, it was just the building that I wanted," he said, laughing again.

Since the closing of that restaurant, Perez has been proprietor of Al's Diner, Theresa's Cafe Senora and Theresa's Cafe located inside the Holiday Inn, as well as a small diner in Como for a short period of time.

"Theresa's Cafe was home of the \$5 buffet," he explained. "And at Al's we had \$5 specials, too."

Perez explained that in spite of the struggling economy he can still afford to offer the best prices in town due to his longevity in the business and his good working relationship with the company he has been purchasing from for years.

"I've been in the business for over 25 years buying from the same company," he said. "We're not cutting back on the value of our food. I know what food costs. Everyone seems to think the economy is at a point where EVERYTHING is outrageous. It isn't. Food is still reasonable to purchase on my end. I get a great deal."

According to Perez, newer establishments don't have the buying power that he has because they haven't been in the business as long as he has.

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"I've been buying from Sysco for 25 years. At one time I had seven restaurants," he emphasized. "Sysco remembers that we have been good to them, therefore, they've always been good to us. When they give me an 8 percent cut across the board, it's because of how many years I have bought from them.

"That's how I have been able to charge \$5 for a minimum of 10 years now. I don't feel that I need to jab my customers," he added, acknowledging the nation is undoubtedly in an economic recession.

Perez says he is happy to make a couple of dollars off each plate and have satisfied customers feel they are getting their money's worth, rather than raise his prices and have fewer customers.

He went on to say that loyalty to customers and business associates alike are what he has built his business on.

"I'm very loyal, and my customers are loyal to me," he said. "That's basically how I've always run an operation – by loyalty."

Another perk for customers is that Perez delivers free of charge.

"No \$1.50 or \$2 hidden fees — if the plate is \$5 here, it's going to be \$5 on delivery," he said.

"We actually make more off our deliveries than we do in-dining."

Salads are also on the Outlet Cafe's \$5 menu.

Pineapple chicken salad with almonds and chopped celery, grilled or fried chicken salad over greens with sliced cucumbers, tomato, boiled egg and cheese, as well as tuna salad, chef salad

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with grilled ham steak, and chicken Caesar over torn romaine with grated parmesan, croutons and grilled chicken breast are made with the freshest possible ingredients.

And customers can add a bowl of homemade soup for just a \$1.

"My soups are all made from scratch," said Perez referring to tortilla, potato and broccoli-cheddar soups, as well as chowders.

Coming in April is a new menu section called Hot Diggity Dog that will include 12 different kinds of dogs including corny dogs, Coney dogs, sauerkraut dogs and Chicago dogs all using world famous Nathan's brand all- beef franks from New York.

"If you've ever had a Nathan's hot dog, I swear, you'll never want any other kind," Perez said. "They are that good. We'll have a Mexican hot dog with pico de gallo, onions, tomatoes, cilantro, jalapeno topped with chili con queso; a New York style with dill pickle rather than relish, and hand-battered corny dogs served with a Dijon mustard – really, really good."

Serving good food is what it's all about, according to Perez, who said he has his parents to thank for his love of cooking.

"My parents always owned restaurants, and, back in my day, eating was a big event at our house," he explained. "The family meal was a big deal. We always had meals prepared, not snacks and stuff. My mother fixed very nice meals all the time Monday through Sunday.

"At dinner we had our meat and potato – protein and vegetable. We learned how to eat properly and we learned how to cook properly," he emphasized.

According to Perez, in today's restaurants much of the food is purchased already prepared and all that's necessary is to heat and serve.

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"We don't do that here. Everything is prepared from scratch," he said. "Comfort food, that's the kind of food we serve. It is the best \$5 meal in town and I'll stand toe-to-toe with anybody. It boils down to taking the time to do it yourself. And I guarantee it. If you sit down and you have one of my meals and you don't like it, guess what? You get your money back. It's that simple. I never would charge anybody for something they don't like. In 10 years I've never had one meal returned. So that ought to tell you something."

The Outlet Cafe is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday from noon until 5 p.m.