

The Underground Gourmet Milton Glaser and Jerome Snyder **UN-COMMONS**



In an effort to spread their culinary efforts to cover any kind of preference, the management presents one delicatessen-type sandwich daily. The selection includes: corned beef (\$1.65), beef tongue (\$1.70), pastrami (\$1.65), Virginia ham (\$1.65), English roast

Rarely, if at all, have we found a happy solution to the problem of large-scale institutional-type feeding. The problem is most often solved by some mass feeding formula perhaps sufficient in food value but sorely deficient in imagination. Institutions will inevitably opt for efficiency and non-controversial cooking that results in the sort of food familiarity that breeds contempt from anyone aware of the adventure of good eating.

The Dining Commons on the eighteenth floor of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) at 33 West 42nd Street is a new and most interesting experimental attempt to break out of the restrictive institutional pattern. Feeding is cafeteria-style (with some waiter service) in spacious surroundings that are well and intelligently designed. The Commons was set up first and foremost to serve the students and faculty of the Center, but its doors are *limitedly* open to non-Center outsiders. The restaurant was established by and is under the direction of the Teheran Restaurant. The on-premises and day-to-day management is in the capable hands of Emilio Brasesco. The menu is international in scope (some

of the cooks are Yugoslavs here on an exchange arrangement) with the emphasis on the Italian and French dishes. In general, the offerings are wide-ranging and unusually imaginative, and the choices change daily. The à la carte luncheon and dinner have a common menu and price. Apart from the hot entrees (plats du jour), the menu regularly includes yogurt (35 or 40 cents), a soup of the day (40 cents), a low-priced sandwich du jour which runs pretty much to form except for the price (60 cents), or a choice of two unconventional salads (\$1.25). These salads change daily in no particular order, so that on any given day one may encounter cold salmon Bellevue, stuffed eggplant Greek style, chef's salad, Florida salad, sardine plate garni, Waldorf salad, stuffed tomato surprise, chopped liver du chef, or even a gefilte fish platter at \$1.50. Other under-\$2 items are mainly of the pasta variety; ravioli genovese (\$1.40), manicotti napoletana (\$1.40), lasagna pasticciata (\$1.40), baked ziti romana (\$1.35), spaghetti with meat sauce (\$1.35), fettucini à la carbonara or Alfredo (\$1.45). But in that group you may also find an arroz con pollo (\$1.25).

beef (\$1.85). All sandwiches are made on rye bread and a small salad is included. The general philosophy and effort of the Dining Commons is to present a menu broad enough to offer a student with limited income a simple, nourishing, yet interesting meal for as low as a dollar, and at the same time present more elaborate fare than can go for \$3 or better. The omelette is another daily feature to meet the in-between budget. The choice covers the spectrum—mushrooms, asparagus, ham; Western, Swiss, Bermuda; or two others, Omelette Caruso and Omelette Surprise. Same price for all, \$1.50 each.

In the upper price stratum is the plat du jour. Three plats are the daily choice and a sampling of the exotica you may find includes: cervelle à la française (\$2.45), stuffed breast of veal Florentine (\$2.50), boneless chicken cordon bleu (\$2.40), sweetbreads grand-mère (\$2.60), roast leg of lamb jardinière (\$2.75), coq au Chambertin (\$2.35), shrimps and scallops en brochette (\$2.60), and for the trencherman taste, prime roast beef (\$2.65), beefsteak à la mode (\$2.75), roast loin of pork (\$2.65), and a Hungarian beef

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goulash (\$2.65). A vegetable, potato or a salad is included. Needless to say, such culinary array is hardly found in the customary institutional dining room.

The dishes themselves, while edible and often quite good, are not in the extraordinary class. Portions, although not stingy, are not overly generous. Desserts are confined to about two or three cakes, one of which is the Dining Commons' special joy, a fabulous cheesecake for only 35 cents. Fruit compote, for the more calorie conscious, is 30 cents. Cheese and crackers are priced at a high of 90 cents, but if this seems high, there is some comfort in knowing that the Dining Commons is probably the last refuge of the 10-cent cup of coffee, self-served and an estimable brew indeed. A civilized touch is the small cafe of house wine, white or red (about a glass and a half) for 60 cents. Cocktails, for those so inclined, are 75 cents and up.

As we've indicated, the Dining Commons is exceptionally well put together. There is a short, indented, unobtrusive serving area. The counter display of food is unusually attractive, and in every way uncharacteristic of cafeteria style. The hot dishes are presented more in the manner of a mildly elegant serving buffet than the conventional steam table. Handsome, hardwood tables (seating about six) are commodiously arranged and caned Breuer-designed chairs are a good-looking complement. Plants and a modest collection of judiciously chosen contemporary paintings complete the decor. Clear, unobstructed daylight flows across Bryant Park into the room to add to the general euphoria.

In general, the Dining Commons does not provide super-cooking nor super-bargains. It does however provide an extraordinary opportunity to dine well and relax in an out-of-the-ordinary comfortable environment within an acceptable price range, in a business area that isn't particularly known for dispensing those amenities. In its class of large-scale feeding the Dining Commons is far and away without a peer.

Open five days, Monday through Friday. Continental breakfast from 10 to 11 a.m. (croissants only 15 cents). Luncheon and dinner from 11:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. Prices are the same at both mealtimes. There is a fast waiter service beginning at 5 p.m. in an adjoining dining room. There is a service charge of 75 cents per person but no further tipping is required.

Food—Good
Service—Fair to Good
Ambiance—Excellent
Hygiene—Excellent