



Two for the Road

BY BARBARA ANN ROSENBERG

"Serendipity" is the accidental discovery of something of value. It doesn't even have to be anything major, like a diamond mine or a lode of amethysts. Sometimes it's something just as simple as being hungry in a weird out-of-the-way place and stumbling into an unlikely looking bar or hotel thinking only of bare sustenance and finding an interesting cuisine.

The Hotel Tremont is about as unlikely as they come: an unimpressive structure on the main street in Lansdale. Not that Lansdale is *that* remote—it's only just off the first exit on the northeast extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. But it is unprepossessing—bleak as any Midwestern town, with an aura that belies its proximity to urban Philadelphia. But don't let the outside of the Tremont fool you—once you get inside you'll somehow begin to have a change of heart, to get a feeling for some unknown reason that maybe this isn't any ordinary small town hotel after

all, that maybe it isn't all well-done roast beef, creamed chicken and canned green peas. And, if you stick to your hunches, you'll come out a winner.

Not that the place is so elegant in appearance—it isn't. As you enter there's a pretty good-sized bar area to stop at, or skirt, as you head for one of the two regular dining rooms: the first, an undistinguished but comfortably pleasant, beige room, obviously the older of the two, reminiscent of many small hotels on the continent and a dead tip-off to the management's romance with *les choses françaises*, and Paris in particular, with its illuminated murals of the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame; the other room looks like a lot of rooms anywhere with flocked wallpaper and crystal chandeliers, neither fortunately, ad nauseam. The decor is less puzzling when you learn that the Tremont is run by Marcel Miniger, a Gaul and a perfectionist who now has his son helping in the kitchen.

When you study the dinner menu,

the French line comes on strong again. Neatly grouped under headings printed in the mother tongue (*les hors d'oeuvres*, *potages*, *poissons*, *grillades*, *entrées*) is their standard fare, supplemented by choices from a list titled *specialités du jour*. If you settle on any of the specialties, you won't go wrong. For instance, the Tremont does mouth-watering things with sweetbreads simply sautéed with mushrooms (\$4) or frogs' legs Provençale (\$4), or filet of flounder stuffed with crabmeat (\$6). But then, almost anything else you sample will be well prepared, too.

If you're of the school that says, "If a little butter is good, a lot is better," you'll be delighted with the baked shad (in season) fairly oozing with golden goodness. If, on the other hand, you're watching your weight or your cholesterol, you might want to ask the chef to back off a bit.

With the exception of lobsters, which run a little small (at \$7 the most expensive item on the all à la

ILLUSTRATION BY MARVIN MATTELSON

carte menu), portions are hearty. This is real food for real people, not just for itinerants who happen by, but clearly designed to cater to repeat trade.

Interestingly enough, while there is some obvious obeisance to France and the food cult thereof, the allegiance is not an obsession—and what results is a curious, rather pleasant *mélange* of cultures. For instance, in France eating habits dictate that salad follows the entrée, while hereabouts most folks like to nibble on it before their main course arrives. Evidently the Tremont has no problem with that, and along comes your crispy salad early in the meal whether or not you choose an appetizer from the varied escargots Bourguignonne (\$1.75), clams casino (\$1.75) and a not too rich but exceedingly tasty vichyssoise (65¢ a bowl).

Wines to complement the menu were obviously chosen with great care, with French types far and away in the lead. The list includes a couple of Bordeaux Grands Crus, a Bâtard Montrachet (an excellent white Burgundy) as well as some lesser French breeds, and some Alsatian, Portuguese and domestic varieties, all at reasonable prices.

The Tremont is located at Main and Broad Streets. Dinner is served till 9:30 Mondays thru Thursdays, till 10:00 on weekends. A reservation (1-855-4266) is almost imperative on weekends.

Don't start out on your trek to the Tremont in expectation of *la grande cuisine*. What you'll get is more like solid American food with French overtones, meticulously chosen for quality, prepared with utmost care and sold at eminently reasonable prices. And these days you can hardly beat that combination—even in Lansdale.

AS LONG AS you're out in the provinces, another even less prepossessing place you might stumble into (although heaven only knows why you'd be on Stewart Avenue in Glenside if someone hadn't tipped you off) is the **Switchville Tavern** (what a name—sounds like a cross between a transvestite bar and a hangout for wife swappers, but judging from the patrons neither is the case). The outside looks like any grubby neighborhood watering hole—and the inside isn't much better. The paint is peeling and the decor is an assortment of beer mugs and other uninspired junk. But something is different—the guys and gals

gathered around the bar are drinking, true, but that somehow doesn't seem to be the sole reason for most of them being there. They're a mixed crew, the gals in pants or good little knits or whatever, and the guys in everything from business suits to blue denim work shirts. But the one thing most of them share is an air of anticipation; that if they wait long enough they will eventually get something to eat. (Maybe if you go at 6 you can avoid a wait, but otherwise it seems to be inevitable—no reservations.) And they're all comparing notes on the food, making recommendations about their favorite entrée or appetizer or both.

The routine for getting a table goes something like this: You give your name to the hostess when you arrive, or if she isn't there you write it on a list by the door of the dining room, just across a partition from the bar. Eventually, someone takes note of the fact that you've indicated a desire to eat and they approach you at the bar with a menu. Sometime after you order—no guarantee how long—you *will* get a table. The hangup seems to be the chef. He loves to cook and won't trust anyone else to do anything, so if you want to sample his stuff you just have to wait for him to get around to your order.

Mostly it's rewarding. For openers, some excellent onion soup, and the baked clams are absolutely marvelous, too.

When you get to the entrees you'll do well to consider the flounder in a creamy wine sauce (\$4.25), subtle and done to a tender, flaky turn; or the soft-shell crabs in garlic sauce, very unsubtle but absolutely grand. Steaks (\$5.95) are a staple and come prepared as specified, no mean accomplishment in a place like this.

But unfortunately there is a fly in the ointment. In this instance it seems to be that the chef only has respect for protein food (with the exception of the aforementioned soup, and even then it's the gorgeous beefy stock that provides the pizzazz). He couldn't care less, it seems, for vegetables, evidenced by the fact that the salad is pallid iceberg lettuce and the French fries or anything else indifferently prepared. So if you're on one of those diets that lets you eat this way, you're in clover. If you're not, make one up—or pretend.

In most joints like this any request for a wine menu would only bring snickers—or maybe even downright jeers. Not so in Switchville where they trot out a more extensive carte than

even most of the elegant so-called continental places in town. The list is long on Burgundies—maybe a cool dozen—and also includes some representatives from Bordeaux, the Rhone, the Loire, and even Germany, Italy and the good old U.S.A.—at unbeatable prices.

So, if you like the offbeat, don't mind peeling paint and have plenty of time and patience, put this one on your list. On the other hand, if you want to impress that bigshot visiting fireman, well, maybe you'd better go somewhere else.

The exact address is 397 Stewart Avenue. The telephone is TU 4-9637. Dinners are served Monday to Saturday from 6 to 11. ■ ■