

Foreign Intrigue

Down on Penn's Landing, at 26 South Front Street, across the rubble of the expressway-to-be, wedged between the shipping and receiving building of the Puppy Palace and some wholesale meat purveyors, is Philadelphia's newest chic restaurant, the **Parson's Table**, showing up in startling contrast to its neighbors with its Mondrian-like black and white exterior design.

And the smashing contemporary decor is carried over inside, executed primarily in plastic, stainless steel and glass. The restaurant takes its name from its dining room furnishings, that darling of contempo decorators, the pristine Parson's table, which promises to rival the Eames chair as a classic of our times. The tables are arranged to seat two, four or six (presumably they'll rearrange if you have a bigger group) and strikingly set with gleaming stainless place plates to reflect the quiet overhead lighting which forms an important part of the decor.

The international menu offers a mélange of interesting choices mostly hailing from Spain, Italy and France. The selection is reminiscent of San Francisco menus. Don't look for classic renditions of anything you choose, but stay loose and know that you're in a place where the cook takes liberties, enjoys variations on a theme

and digs his creative role in the kitchen.

Sometimes his creative flair is rewarding, but other times it misses entirely. The former is the case in the black bean soup, with the beans left whole, not puréed, and redolent of cumin. Gazpacho, on the other hand, comes off as plain old tomato juice with some cut-up raw vegetables sprinkled in it. Other soups (all \$1 a portion) may not all be outstanding but they're pretty good.

We had crêpes (\$2) as a starter, filled with chicken livers and mushrooms and glazed with a bit of cheese—a highly satisfactory creation. In keeping with the international flavor, there's also quiche Lorraine, steamed mussels, the ubiquitous shrimp cocktail, here dubbed "cocktail de gambas," and sevice, an Acapulco specialty—fish marinated in lemon and sauced with tomato puree.

The Parson's Table concedes to the meat and potatoes types, with steak (\$7), rack of lamb (\$7) or roast beef (\$6.50) before taking off into the culinary stratosphere to the star of the menu, an excellent cioppino, a San Francisco fish stew with its roots in Italian zuppa di pesce and French bouillabaisse—a noteworthy choice at \$7.50. And then there's a huge portion of paella. The serving pan is oversized—and filled to the

brim with a gargantuan serving of saffron rice, topped by shrimp, clams, chicken, pimiento and peas. But something is missing—and that something in this case is chorizos, a uniquely flavored Spanish sausage that should give the dish its special oomph. Somehow the substitute Italian sausage doesn't do the trick. It's too bad, because paella is a rarity in this city.

Veal rollatine, chicken Sevillana and filet of sole complete the entrée selection. If you're very hungry you might want to add to your intake the specialty of the house, a pesto Genevese (\$2), a green sauce with fresh basil, garlic and pine nuts that makes spaghetti light up.

Unfortunately, desserts are not nearly as spectacular. The orange mousse comes off as orange whip-'n'-chill with gelatine as the stabilizing force. The pastry is straight from an ordinary bakery. But happily there are also fresh strawberries. If you long for something sweet, stick to fruit and you'll come out a winner.

If you're intent on wine, ask for the carte, but be forewarned that it offers slim pickings—too bad in a place that's otherwise geared to supersophisticated tastes. Perhaps the featured pitchers of iced sangria (\$4.50 large, \$2.50 small) are supposed to substitute. Oranges and wine make a nice combination for washing down

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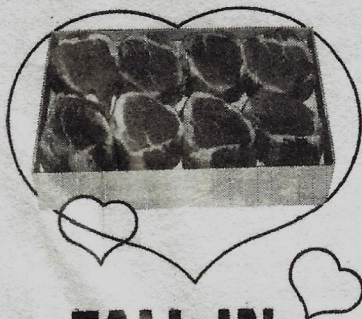
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paella, but they don't do a thing for cioppino.

Other goodies make the scene at lunch—different ones on different days, marked up on a chalk board instead of a menu to allow for the flexibility of the cook's whim. But eggs Flamenco (\$2) in a flavorful tomato sauce with artichoke hearts and pepperoni are pretty much of a staple—and a delicious one at that.

Lunch 11:30 to 2:30, dinner 6 to 11 and Saturday until 1. To be on the safe side, don't go without a reservation (WA 5-4447), as the place only seats 75. The atmosphere is Now and the room tends to fill up pretty quickly.

—Barbara Ann Rosenberg

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The recent trend among Chinese restaurant mavens is toward authenticity: if the duck doesn't have straw from the nest in it, it's bogus. Nevertheless, a large segment of the Chinese restaurant-going community still hungers after excellent interpretations of old favorites.

For both these groups, there's a happy solution. It's **China Lane** restaurant, 923 Sproul Road in Springfield, Delaware County (KI 3-1990). Stuck in the middle of a small shopping plaza among a bowling alley, a barracks-like garden apartment complex and a pizza shop, China Lane is never crowded and always excellent (I've eaten there with guests over 20 times, and the quality has never varied). The absence of a substantial Jewish community nearby seems the reason for the lack of customers.

China Lane boasts one of the most delicious dishes I've ever tasted, in any sort of restaurant. It's called Beef Korean (\$3.60) and is a huge platter of small beef slices sauteed in a sauce based on wine and oyster sauce. The aroma of this dish as it arrives sizzling from the kitchen never fails to make the mouth water.

Another winner is Chow San Sze (\$3.20), a potpourri of barbequed chicken, pork, lobster and shrimp in an indescribably delicate and tasty Chinese vegetable-based sauce. Ha Ding (\$2.90), a shrimp and vegetable dish, subtly grows on the diner until he wants more—just when he is finished. To sample the brilliance applied to familiar dishes, try the Butterfly Chicken (\$3.00), plump hunks of white meat chicken stuffed with chopped pork and scallions and then barbequed in a crusty, tasty shell. In the traditional vein, China Lane serves the customary won ton soup, egg roll and, of course, ice cream for dessert

(the fortunes in the cookies are always overwhelmingly favorable).

The secret of the culinary excellence here seems to be the great variety and care with which the proper sauces and vegetables are combined. Each dish in a dinner of, say, four separate ones is different, yet each complements the total dinner in an orchestrated manner.

China Lane has a dreamlike quality about it because no one seems to be in charge and the staff's command of English is tenuous at best. There is no bar and it was impossible to find out whether they welcome BYOers, since no one knew what we were talking about. But since the dress is casual to the extreme (shorts are considered formal here), toting a bottle of wine wouldn't be likely to cause any raised eyebrows. Reservations are unnecessary, since it's so uncrowded.

Eating like a horse (a full dinner, including soup, egg roll, a main dish and dessert), expect to pay no more than \$5 per person. How can you go wrong?

—William K. Mandel

CITY DINING

Because of limited space, we are obligated to confine our dining listing to those restaurants that have indicated a desire to reach the Philadelphia Magazine audience by becoming advertisers. Prices and hours subject to change.

PHILADELPHIA

(Center City)

Arthur's Steak House, 1512 Walnut St. (PE 5-2590). This meaty eatery is one of the best restaurants in town and a tastefully decorated haven for beef gourmets. It also has one of the most enticing bars around; the martinis are Philly's wickedest. Some seafood and fowl specialties. L—11-3 (\$1.25-\$3.50); D—3-11, Sat 4-1 (\$3.50-\$7). Closed Sun.

Bellevue Court Lounge, rear entrance at 1418 Walnut St. Building (KI 6-1488). Tucked away on Bellevue Court at Chancellor is one of center city's liveliest bars. Ultraviolet lighting enhances the curved beauties of the oval bar; a mural of ancient Rome sets off the fine Italian-American cuisine. L—11-3:30; D—5-10; S—10-2. Cocktail hour 4 to 6. Closed Sun.

The Blue Fox, 11 S. 21st St. (LO 7-9895). The menu is limited, but since when is that a crime? Especially when some of the choices are rarely found in many other restaurants. The Blue Fox features paella, beef Wellington and veal involtini delizia along with steaks and seafood. Interesting sandwiches at lunch. L—11:30-4 (\$1.50-\$3); D—5:30-10 (a la carte from \$5). Bar open till 2 a.m. Closed Sun.

Bookbinders, Old Original, 125 Walnut St. (WA 5-7027). This is the town's most famous restaurant, it has an international reputation, and with good reason. The specialty is seafood, including lobsters you can pick