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A Feast of People

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It is true that the food is good at the Butler Dairy Boy. Unusually good. A visitor several times, I stayed one afternoon for a few hours, and heard departing customers say both “Those were the best french fries I ever ate,” and “Generally, you don’t get a good hamburger out like this.” In many restaurants, one could visit for several hours, and not hear either. I ate the chili: Huge chunks of burger, topped by crunchy pieces of onion and substantial gratings of cheese. The peach pie: crust—crisp, thin, light. A thick ridge of pastry encircling the pie. It was a meal of irregular shapes reminding me that this was home cooking, not fast food. The menu on the wall read “Dinners $3.95,” and listed chicken fried steak, chicken fillet, and catfish. The special that day was hamburger steak with fried onions, cheese potatoes, ranch style beans, salad, toast. “Sometimes I make a hot steak sandwich,” Connie, the owner, told me, “and serve it with mashed potatoes, gravy, and salad.” On Friday, she serves steaks and baked potatoes. Pies include peach, pineapple, cherry, coconut, chocolate, and pumpkin. “Sometimes Grandma makes cinnamon rolls, and brings them when she comes in to talk,” Connie explained. The items on the menu are not unusual, but the sure touch that prepares them is. The food is good. And plentiful. I saw one of the specials being served. As the waitress carried it to the table, the food was heaped over her hands, the plate lost from view. One woman complained repeatedly, savoring her meal, of too much food.

But the owner said to me, “If I had to write an article about this place, I’d write about the people, not the food.” I saw her point, in more ways than one. I am one of the people, and I know that a big part of my attraction to home cooking, to family restaurants in general, lies in how they make me feel as one of the people, not in how the food tastes. After a series of meals at McDonald’s and Hardee’s, walking into the Butler Dairy Boy has the feel of walking into my own kitchen through the back door. The pace slows, the muscles relax. And then, nourished in this way, I take the time to notice the other customers I am eating with. I become part of a group. Even though the restaurant has no contrived atmosphere, its customers make one together. They needn’t conform to plants and music. They need only conform to the tone they have helped to create themselves. It’s like coming home from college to a family one’s been missing.

The signs on the wall do set a mood, I suppose, but more as quick interjections than as general ambiance. Connie gave me permission to quote them.

“Caution: I can go from 0 to bitch in 4.1 seconds.”
“Open: when I get here.”
“Okie spoken here.”
“Help! I’m trapped in the establishment!”

“If God had wanted me to cook, he wouldn’t have invented restaurants.”

New customers notice the signs during reflective mouthfuls, during perfunctory mouthfuls, during unconscious mouthfuls that are only brief lapses in conversation. But since the place derives its tone from the customers themselves, they quickly forget the signs. The regulars, of course, stopped seeing them a long time ago, but they haven’t stopped noticing the people they’re eating with.

To understand this fact about the Butler Dairy Boy, you have to understand, too, that it sits on route 33 between Arapaho and Hammon. There is nothing but rolling plain for miles in any direction out from Butler. Journeying to dinner there is a feast in itself, comprised of dishes that vary with the season—the emerald green of spring wheat, the mustard yellow of fall weeds. Knowing I can achieve that fullness on the way to the chili makes the chili even more of a draw before I leave home. And growing full of all
that spaciousness empties me of lesser things, making me hungry on arrival.

But I am prepared by the trip to be nourished by folks too. There is no other restaurant nearby, only a Kwikstop. I have the impression, when I’m headed for the Dairy Boy, that all roads lead there, converging on the only fellow humans in the hemisphere. I am hungry to see them when I arrive.

A feast of home cooking. A feast of people. These are home-grown people, the owner explained. In here, they are never vulgar, never critical of others. Husbands and wives come together. During my visit, I saw one middle-aged couple share the same side of the booth, leaving the other side empty. There is an elegance to the women who come here. In jeans and flannel, they are ladies, restrained and courteous. Often a bracelet, a ring, or the angle of a cigarette in their fingers gives them away.

At ten and four, the regulars come in for coffee. From 4:30 to 5:30 or 6:00, the county workers—on road crew, say—are there. One woman, 61, from England, comes in every Friday night with her husband, a local. They met in England during the Korean War when she was in the Royal Air Force. In the Dairy Boy, they discuss religion and politics. Sometimes, she plays casino with room is alone, thoughtful, silent, enjoying an unhurried cigarette. She meets no eyes when she leaves, taking her leisure on the way out. You know she’s been here before. One pair drops in to chat with someone whose car they saw parked outside.

The talk, which can include everyone there, as the place is small, runs to crops, the prices of wheat and cotton, local ballgames, local humor, local tragedies. The weather, tires, diets, talk shows, blood pressure. The local exchange student from New Guinea. The ones in Sentinel from Holland and Czechoslovakia. What it must be like to live in a Communist country with no knowledge of Jesus Christ. The voices of the men who are talking among themselves are low, emphatic, musical. You cannot hear all they say—it is a tone that emerges, as much as content. A father, grandfather, and teenage boy eat and talk together.

—They ain’t no way you can drive...pick-up...they ain’t no way.
—...it’s got a twelve-foot bed.
...all the pullin’ power he needs...

"Caution: I can go from 0 to bitch in 4.1 seconds."
"Open: when I get here."
"Okie spoken here."
"Help! I'm trapped in the establishment!"
"If God had wanted me to cook, he wouldn't have invented restaurants."
a half-ton pick-up. You can put... a half-ton pick-up...
The talk is easy, courteous. "Yes, sir": the soft, fluid punctuation of the boy's words to his elders. All three laugh quietly together. Then silence, while the thoughts gather for the next exchange.

The male voices across the room are lower, less intelligible. The conversation is private, more heated, voices rising and falling, a sharp laugh breaking the hum. A family comes in, girl, say 14, boy, maybe 16, father and mother. "John said he wanted to eat out tonight. I said he'd better go see if Connie's cooking supper."

Connie can remember when Foss Lake, a few miles down the road, was a river, before they put the dam in. Many of the locals bring the history of the place in with them when they come, one kind of continuity that holds Butler together as a place on the map. In the Dairy Boy, they remember back together, back to high school, back to childhood. Out the window, horses run around in the field adjoining the Butler school across route 33. The sky is grey, the trees bare. No kids in the playground today. Trucks towing horse trailers pass back and forth. When they've finished their food, the customers disappear into the pockets of this shared life, another kind of continuity that, despite the stretches of land that separate them, makes them a group when they eat together.