

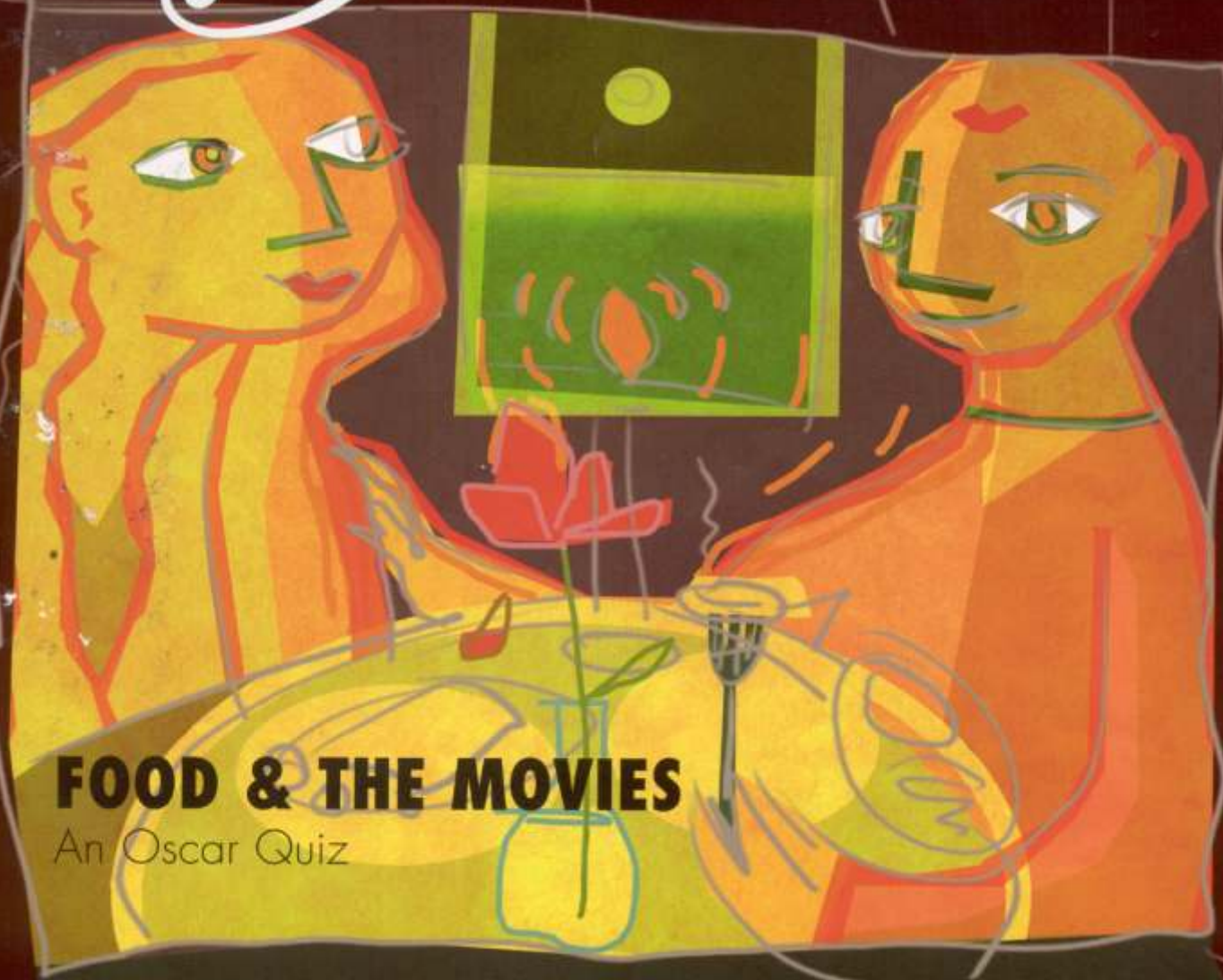
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my table

HOUSTON'S DINING MAGAZINE



FOOD & THE MOVIES

An Oscar Quiz



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**SEXY RESTAURANTS TO ENJOY WITH YOUR VALENTINE
HOUSTON'S BEST BANH MI SANDWICHES
PLUS REVIEWS, HOUSTON BITES BACK, THE EATER'S DIGEST**

Mr. Anon: Houston's Best Damn Restaurant

THE OTHER NIGHT A FRIEND SAID, "YOU OUGHT TO DO A COLUMN WHERE YOU PICK YOUR FAVORITE RESTAURANT IN THIS WHOLE BLOODY TOWN."

Intriguing idea. Idiotic, but intriguing.

Oh, why not?

Anon votes the Raven Grill best of breed.

Now before you start firing off those letters to *My Table* and we get into a food fight, let's consider what makes "best." Is it food, service, décor, price, parking lot, staying power or a casserole of all the above?

Over the last 35 years, Anon has done a pretty thorough job of eating around Space City. Granted, some of you have probably done better, but he's not going to apologize at this late date.

Most restaurants prove to be short-lived. You blink and they're history, sort of like that little town where "Welcome to ..." and "Come back soon" are two sides of the same sign. Some are sorely missed. He can think of places gone but not forgotten – downtown Maxim's, Spiffin on Ferndale, the old Joe Lee's in Kemah, Rudi's, San Jacinto Inn, D'Amico, Sabine, the original Red Lion, Lillian's Crepes, the Stella Link Kahn's Deli, Bordman's. They are vastly outnumbered by the duds who got what they deserved.

As Houston and Houstonians have grown up, so have its restaurants. It's not just that there are more choices, there's simply better food served by talented chefs in prettier places. (Service is still playing catch-up.) We're now comparing competing carpaccios the way we used to rate chicken-fried steaks.

Having said that, you might be expecting Anon to pick one of our temples of trendo cuisine as his favorite. Maybe Noé or Aries or the new Bistro Moderne (he can't quite bring himself to honor its rather silly lower-case name).

But when it comes right down to it, time and again the Raven satisfies him on more levels more often. Besides, his palate makes no claim to true gourmand sophistication.

Guess it's time to begin justifying his choice.

BEST SELLERS

Raven

Tower O' (onion & poblano pepper) Rings
Grilled Salmon Salad
Grilled Catfish
New York Strip
Cedar Plank Salmon

Picnic

Chicken Salad Sandwich
Smoked Turkey Sandwich



A LITTLE HISTORY

In 1998, Rob and Sara Cromie returned to their hometown determined to open a restaurant of their own. Sara had grown up on Milford street and Rob in Highland Village. They had begun dating at Lanier Middle School. They were hardly neophytes when it came to the food-service industry. Rob had opened outposts for the Fat Tuesday chain in Atlanta and Dallas, and Sara had been a trainer for Chuy's. They had also opened other people's pubs and had been part owners of a microbrewery.

Once back in Houston, their goal was to create a casual but attractive place, a bit off the beaten path, that would offer menu variety and value. The Raven opened in March of 1998 in a forlorn little strip center at 1916 Bissonnet, a location surrounded by middle to upper-middleclass residential areas. Sara chose

the name to honor her alma mater, Poe Elementary School around the corner.

The Raven took off, and eight years later the place is constantly packed with repeat customers whose demographic profiles skew toward the relatively affluent and intellectual, thanks to the nearby universities and Museum District. By and large, they are a pretty civilized bunch.

On any given day or night, large tables of multigenerational families and groups of friends are chowing down. It's also not unusual to spot a "famous" Houstonian or two, there because this is not one of those see-and-be-seen joints like, say, Tony's. (Example: A well-known art museum director is a regular.) Raven patrons come back for the

unpretentious food, reasonable prices and cozy atmosphere, and they tend to linger over their meals. The regulars tend to prefer Sunday through Thursday, while weekends attract more first-timers.

Mr. Anon has often noticed that most of the children in attendance are seen but not heard. This ain't no Chuck E. Cheese's.

Sales have increased about 10 percent every year.

ABOUT THE FOOD

The kitchen grills most of its meat and fish entrees over a green mesquite fire, which adds extra flavor. From day one almost everything has been made in-house, even the ranch dressing. The only exceptions are the child's menu chicken fingers and the Blue Bell ice cream.

The basic menu tends toward home-style rather than haute. There

are daily specials, and customers come back for them week after week.

Sunday is chicken-fried steak night, Monday's best-seller is the roast chicken, and the pot roast is a cold-weather favorite. There's a different quesadilla concoction every day. With all their repeat business, the Cromies say it would be suicide to tamper too much with the offerings. Same goes for perceived value. There's only been one price increase in eight years.

This is not to say every visit is a smashing success. While the Anons have never had a bad meal at the Raven, there have been nights when the food seemed a bit pedestrian. Hell, no diner bats 1,000.

ABOUT THE HELP

Over the years, Anon has seen very little turnover among the personnel. Again, here's another element that enhances the Raven's consistency. The

waitstaff has been around long enough to know the menu and their customers. They're pleasant but not pushy.

When Anon asked Rob and Sara how they account for retaining help in a peripatetic business, here's what they said. By not treating the staff as "employees" and demanding that every person be regarded as equally important and deserving of respect, they avoid those front- and back-of-the-house problems so common in many restaurants. The perks, such as vacation pay, are also atypical. As evidence, the Cromies note that their newest kitchen hire has been with them a year and a half.

Of all the friendly faces, Anon must single out bar manager Bill Ealy, perhaps his favorite bartender in all of Houston. The man knows his cocktails and wines and clientele. Having followed Bill from bar to bar over the years, it's been a personal delight to

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still find him serving up hooch and banter at the Raven for the last eight years.

PICNIC ON THE GROUNDS

Any place this successful has obviously attracted offers of expansion from time to time. The Cromies have had proposals to open branches in Memorial, Pearland and any number of shopping center developments around the city. They had wisely resisted on the grounds they would be stretched too thin to maintain the hands-on attention to quality that has assured Raven Grill's continued popularity.

That is not to say they lacked the will to succeed and the desire to improve the old bottom line. They simply found a more manageable solution. In October 2000, they opened

THE RESIDENT CHICKEN

How many restaurants can you name with a mascot? The Raven's resident chicken just showed up one day two and a half years ago and never left. Nicknamed Julia Candia by one of the chefs, she delivers an egg a day in exchange for a home on the patio. The only downside has been a customer who seems to have an abject fear of poultry.



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Picnic a couple of doors down from the Raven in the same building on Bissonnet.

Picnic specializes in sandwiches, salads, desserts and soups, with an emphasis on take-out. Also offered are large-order delivery and catering. Like the Raven, everything is made in-house, including the artisanal breads, under the watchful eyes of Rob and Sara. Lunchtime there's a line of busy business types and soccer moms with kids in tow. Most grab their orders and are gone, although there is seating at a few rustic picnic tables for those who choose to eat in. Picnic turns off the lights around 5 pm, about the time the Raven starts to pick up steam.

If there's any negative to the opening of Picnic, it's the increased demand on the 70-car parking lot. So when an upscale antique shop moved into the space between the two eateries, the Cromies insisted that it close from 11 to 2. That helps a bit.

SUMMING UP

Mr. Anon pondered his choice of Houston's best restaurant for several months. He can't deny that, in the final analysis, proximity to home and the fact that the Anons' demographic profiles pretty much match the Raven crowd (except for that intellectual bit) influenced his decision. But ultimately there was the simple fact that the Cromies have created what every restaurant should strive for: an attractive and hospitable place where a fellow can enjoy a decent meal without breaking the bank.

Maybe *My Table's* publisher puts it best. This is the "nearly perfect neighborhood restaurant."

Mr. Anon is a pseudonym for a Houston advertising executive and restaurant addict.

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