

CHEAP EATS

SOMETIMES, YOU'RE JUST NOT FEELING FANCY. SOMETIMES—AND WE'VE BEEN THERE, *TRUST US*—YOU WANT A DIVE-BAR BURGER. A BOWL OF BOLOGNESE. A FIERY INDIAN CURRY. A BASKET OF CATFISH WITH ALL THE FIXIN'S. AND TACOS—*OH, THE TACOS*. FOR THOSE TIMES, THERE ARE THESE 65 RESTAURANTS.

(YOU'RE WELCOME.)

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARSHIA KHAN

MMMM, PIZZA CAFE.

TACOS
NOODLES
PHO

CATFISH
BURGERS
BARBECUE

PIZZA
CURRY

DUMPLINGS

BY KATIE BRIDGES, SYD HAYMAN, JORDAN P. HICKEY, NICHOLAS HUNT AND MARIAM MAKATSARIA

HOW TO EAT AMERICAN

EAT THIS PHOTO **CHEESEBURGER (WITH SIDE SALAD) AT THE ROOT CAFE: \$8.50**

BEST VALUE

BENSON'S GRILL \$

2515 Rogers Ave., Fort Smith; (479) 782-8181

With fantastic sweet-potato pancakes, classic breakfast fare (eggs any-way-you-want-them! Cheese-covered hash browns!) and a reputation for some of the best burgers around, we can see why some people never want to leave this Fort Smith staple. Good thing it's one of the state's few 24/7 operations.

YOU'RE GETTING: The Big Mama. And maybe a fork and extra napkins. (When faced with a heap of Swiss cheese, tomatoes, sautéed and fresh onions, mushrooms and bacon on top of a half-pound patty, you'll need 'em.)

COTHAM'S MERCANTILE AND COTHAM'S IN THE CITY

5301 Arkansas 161, Scott; (501) 961-9284
1401 W. Third St., Little Rock; (501) 370-9177

Though the original Cotham's Mercantile in Scott is just a year shy of its 100th birthday, it's *only* been serving food for a paltry 32 years. What is the crowning achievement of three decades' worth of country cooking? The Hubcap Burger, which features as many 1-pound, 8-inch patties as you dare to order. (It doesn't take an etymologist to see how the beast got its name.)

YOU'RE GETTING: A side of Cotham's famous double-dipped onion rings for the table—or yourself. (This is a judgment-free list.)

GAIL'S DINER

250 E. Military Drive, North Little Rock; (501) 747-2193

The menu may be small—just two pages of breakfast and lunch items that include overstuffed omelets, biscuits and gravy, and a burger topped with grape jelly, jalapeños and a fried egg—but the dishes at this North Little Rock diner are as delicious as they are colossal. And about the grape jelly on that burger, trust us: You won't regret it.

YOU'RE GETTING: Don't trust us? The Train Wreck omelet is stuffed with peppers, onions, garlic, spinach, ham and sausage. And it's served all day.

GEORGE'S RESTAURANT

2120 Grand Ave., Fort Smith; (479) 785-1199

You know the diner from *Seinfeld*? Had the seminal show been set in Fort Smith instead of NYC (long shot, we know), Jerry and

\$ = cash only



TOP FIVE BURGERS

Midtown Burger

Midtown Billiards, Little Rock



Jumbo cheeseburger

Wink's Malt Stand, North Little Rock



Cheeseburger

Cotham's Mercantile, Scott / Cotham's in the City, Little Rock



Third-pound burger

C-J's Butcher Boy Burgers, Russellville



Double burger

Feltner Brothers, Fayetteville



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the gang would have almost certainly spent their days hanging out at George's, fighting their way through the piles of hand-cut fries that tower over every burger and sandwich at this much-adored dive.

YOU'RE GETTING: Pie. And if you don't think you can stomach dessert after one of George's award-winning burgers and that mountain of fries, forget the burger and head straight for the sweet stuff.

HUGO'S

25 1/2 N. Block Ave., Fayetteville; (479) 521-7585

No list of Arkansas dives would be complete without Hugo's, which, thanks to nearly 40 years and untold generations of U of A students and faculty, probably has the biggest following of any restaurant in the state. But it's not nostalgia that keeps 'em coming to this basement off the Fayetteville Square. It's the mix of classic bar food and original takes on crêpes, quiche and more.

YOU'RE GETTING: The Derek's Special, because this stack of marinated chicken, Swiss, bacon and honey mustard is flawless (and not just because it's my editor's college favorite).

JIMMY'S SERIOUS SANDWICHES

5116 W. Markham St., Little Rock; (501) 666-3354

Forget that other Jimmy. For more than 30 years, this fast-casual sandwich shop on Markham Street in Little Rock has been serving some of the country's best sandwiches, and Jimmy's has the hardware to prove it. The Garden—a gloriously tasty combination of spinach pâté, sunflower seeds, Swiss, cheddar, provolone and sautéed mushrooms—won the National Sandwich Idea Contest in 1979 and has been the restaurant's best-seller ever since. Meat-lovers need not fret, however; the menu is packed with carnivorous creations.

YOU'RE GETTING: Um, The Garden? Did you not read that it's a freakin' national champion?

MILFORD TRACK

10809 Executive Center Drive, Plaza 2, Little Rock; (501) 223-2257

The first time we tried to find this fresh-ingredients-focused deli and grill, we ended up walking around a nondescript west Little Rock office building for the better part of half an hour. (Pro tip: The P in the elevator stands for plaza, not parking. Press it.) But our perseverance was rewarded with a hearty bowl of lemon-pepper

pasta. It's the deli's modestly priced, imaginative sandwiches, however, that keep us coming back.

YOU'RE GETTING: A hoagie stuffed with spicy roast beef, grilled mushrooms, jalapeños, onions, lettuce and tomatoes and done up with "special sauce."

STAFF FAVORITE

TERRI-LYNN'S BAR-B-Q & DELICATESSEN

10102 Rodney Parham Road, Little Rock; (501) 227-6371

With its housemade tamales and wonderfully tangy barbecue sandwiches, this beloved west Little Rock hole in the wall could have easily scored a spot on our list of best down-home joints. But since it has deli concoctions like The Sharon—fresh smoked turkey, pepper jack cheese and coleslaw topped with mayo and horseradish mustard on an onion roll—that really put this former local grocery on the map, our reviewer tackling this section was more than happy it ended up in his queue.

YOU'RE GETTING: The Sharon. But if that doesn't sound like your thing, don't be afraid to build your own sandwich from the restaurant's selection of house-smoked deli meats.

THE ROOT CAFE

1500 S. Main St., Little Rock; (501) 414-0423

Locavores, rejoice! Just because you want a juicy, drip-through-your-fingers burger doesn't mean you have to sacrifice fresh, locally sourced ingredients at this Little Rock brunch-and-lunch icon. And vegetarians, if you've managed to make it this far down the list without turning the page for greener pastures, here's your reward: The Root's vegetarian and vegan options, such as its spicy tofu banh mi and shiitake mushroom eggs Benedict, could convert a carnivore.

YOU'RE GETTING: Whatever's on special, because seeing chef Jack Sundell's innovative limited editions head to someone else's table might tempt you into grand-theft brunch.

WALKER'S WINGS AND THINGS \$

136 Silver St., Hot Springs; (501) 282-0538

Though created in the spirit of Arkansas' historic dairy bars, this walk-up and cash-only neighborhood joint in Hot Springs opened in 2014. And while, yes, the wings are some of the best around, it's the "things"—juicy burgers, perfectly fried catfish, succulent pork chops—that really make Walker's shine.

YOU'RE GETTING: Three pieces of fish, two wings, fries, coleslaw and hush puppies—aka The Combo Special.

HOW TO EAT LATIN

☎ = cash only

EL CAMINO REAL

815 S. School Ave., Fayetteville; (479) 521-6268

Hey there, reader: We've got a confession. When it comes to Tex-Mex—bottomlessly plated fare where cheese plays a leading role in virtually every dish across the menu—we largely tend to turn a blind eye and tongue, opting instead for our taco trucks and Spanish-language menus. But—yes, *but*—we know a damn-good meal when we see one. And at Camino Real, where tacos are made with care (our server asked that we please eat the pork taco first, as it's really best “right out of the kitchen”) and a vegetarian menu some 11 items strong ... well, it's good. And it's likely you'll see us making the drive.

YOU'RE GETTING: The chicken enchiladas, because with their freshly made tortillas and well-seasoned chicken, these are much more than just vehicles for cheese.

STAFF FAVORITE

ELIELLA RISTORANTE

7700 Baseline Road, Suite 800, Little Rock; (501) 539-5355

As is so often the case with holes in the wall, the sparse décor at Eliella—the concrete floors and cardboard pallets of unpacked drinks of a place just starting out—relates inversely to the quality of the food. Because *holy god*, this food. Specifically, the pozole. You've never had pork until you've fished a piece from the spicy, unctuous red broth and let it melt on your tongue. Seriously. No chewing required.

YOU'RE GETTING: Pozole. Because at \$5.25 for a “half order” (not listed on the menu), there have got to be few better deals in the city. Also: Please, please get the tacos de cabeza. We're not sure we've had better. Especially for \$1.25.

EL POLLO RICO GRILL

1008 W. Sunset Ave., Springdale; (479) 927-6363

So look: When someone like Jason Paul, mastermind of Rogers' objectively excellent Heirloom, describes a place's grilled chicken (aka *pollo asado a la parrilla*) as “legit,” “delicious” and “killer,” dang it, you listen. And then upon eating the combo plate (ideally sided with charro beans) and walking out for, like, five bucks, you wonder if maybe it'd be better to keep it to yourself and Mr. Paul.

YOU'RE GETTING: A darn-good deal on grilled chicken, especially on Tuesdays, when a two-piece leg-and-thigh combo with two sides, tortillas, chips and salsa goes for ... \$5. Yep.



TOP FIVE TACOS

Taco arriero

Taqueria El Palenque, Little Rock



Taco de alambre

Taqueria Guanajuato, Springdale



Taco de lengua

Taqueria Guadalajara, North Little Rock



Taco de cabeza

Eliella Ristorante, Little Rock



Taco de lengua

Taqueria Samantha II, Little Rock



BEST VALUE

LA HUAZTECA

3140 Central Ave., Hot Springs; (501) 609-9988

Really, it's kind of an odd place. Its façade is painted Creamsicle orange. *Halo's* played on the television. Light bulbs and fancily beaded and bedazzled wallets are sold alongside Western wear and dried pinto beans. But none of that matters because from the creamy, literally good-on-anything tomatillo salsa to the ridiculous *chile relleno* topped with what our server would only deign call “salsa de tomate,” all that matters is the food.

YOU'RE GETTING: The *chile relleno* meal (with rice and beans), which at \$6 is a steal.

LA REGIONAL

7414 Baseline Road, Little Rock; (501) 565-4440

Really, this southwest Little Rock taqueria-slash-full-blown-grocery could have capped the list of our favorite tacos—and, full disclosure, it does. Indisputably. *Sin duda*. But seeing as this favorite among favorites is not only home to some of the finest tacos around, but also remains the only market we know of to score Lizano, aka our Sriracha-caliber Costa Rican sauce obsession, we thought y'all would like to know.

YOU'RE GETTING: Tacos (specifically, the *lengua* ones), a bottle of Lizano—and another for us, please and thank you.

LULU'S LATIN ROTISSERIE & GRILL

315 N. Bowman Road, Little Rock; (501) 228-5564

After leaving Bolivia a few years ago, I bid what I thought would be a final farewell to one of my fondest friends, South American-style rotisserie chicken. And then earlier this year, I had Lulu's chicken, and everything was beautiful again. A few notes: 1. Get the empanadas—and *all* of the sauces. 2. You're really, really going to want the white meat. Really.

YOU'RE GETTING: A whole chicken. Yes, really, because at \$18.50 for the bird and two sides, why the heck would you not?

PUPUSERIA “LA SALVADOREÑA”

416 S. Knoxville Ave., Russellville; (479) 747-7936

Yes, it's a little rough on the eyes—in the words of a co-worker, “ugly both inside and out.” But in keeping with the well-worn truism, you cannot, in fact, judge a book by its cover, particularly once you scarf down one of the eponymous *pupusas*, a traditional Salvadoran dish. (The “Salvadoreña” in the name

is no coincidence because these are, indeed, legit.)

YOU'RE GETTING: Um, *pupusas*—specifically, pork and cheese, or bean and cheese. And heck, seeing as they're under \$1.50, eat your fill—and then get more to share.

ROSALINDA RESTAURANTE HONDUREÑO

900 W. 35th St., North Little Rock; (501) 771-5559

You see how each of these blurbs has a “you're getting” just below it? Well, that's not gonna work here because with a veritable laundry list of Honduran dishes—some 82 numbered items strong—ranging from *carne asada* to *albondigas* (meatballs—no joke) to mouthwatering *chicharrón* (bite-sized pieces of succulent pork) plated with yucca and plantains, the folks at Rosalinda's have made that task near impossible. And for that, we're eternally grateful.

YOU'RE GETTING: Everything mentioned above, plus the fried plantains. And the *pupusas con queso de loroco*. And a glass of ice water, so as not to bust your belt.

TAQUERIA KARINA CAFE

5309 W. 65th St., Little Rock; (501) 562-3951

FYI: There's a lot. Although Karina's has long been a personal favorite, we've yet to visit when the menu failed to overwhelm. But, mind you, it can be managed. Start with the tortas (specifically, the *carnitas* or *lengua*), jump to the lunch specials on the back page, and just work your way down (paying special attention to the *chilaquiles*). Also, on the very outside chance your appetite's gone unsated—or in anticipation of future cravings—there are corn tortillas at Brenda's next door that go 5 pounds for \$3.50. And they're fresh.

YOU'RE GETTING: Everything. But especially that torta (\$7.25 for the massive sandwich and fries).

TAQUERIA SAMANTHA II ☎

7521 Geyer Springs Road, Little Rock; (501) 744-0680

On the surface, it might seem like a place of last resort—an elongated white truck with hand-painted lettering that has been parked, seemingly, for all of eternity in the lot of a Mexican sweets shop. But, and you'll have to trust us on this, with mind-bending tacos (try the *lengua* and *al pastor* for starters, before ordering the rest of the menu), this place has every right to be a destination.

YOU'RE GETTING: Tacos. All of the tacos. (Although you may also want to take a cue from The Root's Jack Sundell on page 37.)

EAT THIS PHOTO PUPUSAS AT ROSALINDA RESTAURANTE HONDUREÑO: \$2 A POP

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HOW TO EAT ASIAN

\$ = cash only

BANANA LEAF

STAFF FAVORITE

425 W. Capitol Ave., Little Rock; (501) 227-0860

Sometimes, when, say, you're putting together a feature on the state's 50 best low-budget eateries, you just *can't eat out anymore*. And then you forget your Tupperware homemade sandwich and are therefore *forced* to pop into this Indian eatery in the lobby of downtown Little Rock's Simmons Tower for lunch, and you have an epiphany: Some places are just so good—like, *so good*—that it tastes like you're not eating out at all. And that Tupperware might just be, *um*, forgotten again tomorrow. And then forever.

YOU'RE GETTING: The combo—"veg" or "nonveg"—so you can sample two or three (a third is just 50 cents extra) of the dishes on the day's menu. And if that menu includes fried cauliflower or spicy chicken vindaloo, by all means.

CHANG THAI AND ASIAN CUISINE

9830 Arkansas 107, Sherwood; (501) 835-4488

There are people—you know who you are—who say, "There's no good Thai food in Little Rock." Those people have not been to Chang Thai. Sure, it's in Sherwood, which, you know, isn't *technically* Little Rock proper—but we'd be willing to drive miles and miles and miles for a spoonful of that panang curry. And often do.

YOU'RE GETTING: An order of *meing kham*, for starters: ginger, toasted coconut, cashew, fried shallot, lime and tamarind-coconut sauce, all wrapped up in a grass-green betel leaf.

KBIRD

600 N. Tyler St., Little Rock; (501) 352-3549

It might not come as a surprise that a man with a name like "Richard Glasgow" isn't Thai. (Nor is he Scottish.) But he spent New Year's in Thailand. And he speaks Thai (kind of). And he hacks open the papayas he uses for his *ohmygod*-good papaya salad

with a machete. In other words: He's hellbent on making the dishes he cooks up in his Hillcrest kitchen as close to the real thing as possible. And it shows.

YOU'RE GETTING: Green papaya salad. *Tom kha gai*, a creamy chicken-and-coconut soup. Pad Thai. Pork skewers. Oh, heck—just order one of everything off Glasgow's hand-scrawled white-board menu.

KHANA INDIAN GRILL

2101 N. College Ave., Fayetteville; (479) 287-4736

It's not so often that a "cheap eats" restaurant offers cocktails. Or craft beers. Or live-edge wood tables. Or imported punched-tin pendant lamps. But while there's ambience aplenty at Fayetteville's new-ish Khana Indian Grill, it's the food—made with seasonal, local ingredients whenever possible—that's the real star. Light and bright, this is Indian food modernized. (And, yes, that's a custom rickshaw parked out front, hand-painted by street artists in India.)

YOU'RE GETTING: The *bhel puri*—a tangle of puffed rice, peanuts, cucumber, radish, chickpeas, green chilies and tamarind chutney.

MR. CHEN'S AUTHENTIC CHINESE COOKING

3901 S. University Ave., Little Rock; (501) 562-7900

Word of warning: Mr. Chen is a prolific cook and offers up a (somewhat overwhelming) laundry list of Chinese dishes at his South University Avenue dining room. But while the usual suspects are all very much present—Kung Pao shrimp, lo mein, General Tso's—it's dishes like his Taiwanese-style braised pork, pan-fried turnip cakes and steamed buns that separate Chen's food from the rest. Added bonus: If you're inspired by what's on your table, you can purchase imported ingredients in the adjoining grocery.

YOU'RE GETTING: That braised pork dish, an order of the sweet-and-sour roast duck and a cache of broth-oozing steamed buns for the table.

TOP FIVE CURRIES

Chicken vindaloo

Banana Leaf, Little Rock



Panang curry

Chang Thai, Sherwood



Pad prik king

kBird, Little Rock



Gaeng massaman

Thep Thai, Fayetteville



Tikka masala

Khana Indian Grill, Fayetteville



EAT THIS PHOTO **PHO TAI (\$7.50), CHICKEN AND SHRIMP VERMICELLI (\$8), AND SPRING ROLLS (TWO FOR \$3) AT MIKE'S CAFE**



BEST VALUE

MIKE'S CAFE

5501 Asher Ave., Little Rock; (501) 562-1515

With palm-tree murals, a disco ball and the Biebs on repeat, it's safe to say southwest Little Rock's Mike's Cafe is a bright, cheerful kind of place. Which is only fitting, given that the Vietnamese flavors coming out of its kitchen are, well, exceedingly bright and cheerful. Mint-studded spring rolls; an easy-to-love pho; rice vermicelli perked up by fish sauce, lime and chilies—this is a light take on comfort food you'll be craving on the regular.

YOU'RE GETTING: *Bun thit nu'ong*: luscious, lacquered pork on rice vermicelli with all the fixings. And the *banh mi*—at \$3.50, Mike's stellar version of the French-Vietnamese mash-up has to be one of the best values in the state. OR THE WORLD.

PHO VIETNAM \$

2214 Rogers Ave., Fort Smith; (479) 782-3227

You'll come across it several times in this feature, that whole don't-judge-a-book-by-its-cover thing. But seriously: Don't. Especially if said "book" is gas-station-turned-Vietnamese-restaurant Pho Vietnam in Fort Smith. Because if you were to pass on the place based on its questionable aesthetic choices—notably, the mishmash of barnyard figurines and aquariums, or the cardboard boxes of supplies haphazardly stacked around the room—you'd be missing out on a beefy, brothy bowl of goodness well worthy of a jaunt up Interstate 40. (Word to the wise: Bring cash.)

YOU'RE GETTING: The combination pho—a slurpable bowl brimming with beef tenderloin, brisket and meatballs.

SOUTHERN GOURMASIAN

219 W. Capitol Ave., Little Rock; (501) 313-5645

We, like legions of our fellow Little Rockers, cried happy tears when it was announced back in 2014 that this beloved Asian-Southern-fusion food truck was putting down brick-and-mortar roots downtown. But we were happier than most because the West Capitol Avenue location meant we'd be a mere two-block stroll from those sticky, savory buns we hold so dear. And the shrimp and grits. And that spicy-but-oh-so-delightful chicken-and-dumplings bowl.

YOU'RE GETTING: Balinese chicken buns with cilantro-honey vinaigrette or one of those clever Asian spins on Southern favorites, like the "Grilled Kimcheese."

THREE FOLD NOODLES & DUMPLING CO.

215 Center St., Little Rock; (501) 372-1739

"Minimalist." We're going with "minimalist." We thought about calling this Chinese eatery's menu "small," but really, it's just well-edited. Because when a restaurant's noodles, steamed buns and dumplings—those are your three choices, topped or filled with your choice of chicken, pork or tofu—are this good, who needs options? (And just in case you do, there's a rotating "seasonal" dish, too.)

YOU'RE GETTING: Whatever's labeled on the chalkboard as "seasonal"—on a recent visit, that meant a warming noodle soup with braised beef shank. Oh, and an order of sesame balls to go.

THEP THAI RESTAURANT

1525 S. School Ave., Fayetteville; (479) 443-0029

Those Kaffir lime leaves in your green curry? If it's spring or summer, chances are they were plucked from the koi-pond-dotted garden surrounding this south Fayetteville Thai spot. But garden-fresh herbs and vegetables aren't the only thing separating this from the other Thai options nearby: Thep also offers a lovely covered patio and a killer beer menu to boot.

YOU'RE GETTING: Fresh Thai basil rolls and a bowl of *tom kha gai* brimming with lemongrass, lime leaves and tomatoes—in order to make the most of the owner's green thumbs.

HOW CHEFS EAT

WHERE DO LITTLE ROCK TOQUES HEAD WHEN THEY'RE AFTER SOMETHING CHEAP AND CHEERFUL? WE WERE CURIOUS, TOO ...

CHEAP

MARK ABERNATHY
LOCA LUNA AND RED DOOR

WHOLE HOG IN NORTH LITTLE ROCK



PULLED-PORK SANDWICH WITH SHACK SAUCE

“Personally, I prefer the North Little Rock Whole Hog, even though the locations are all similar. They also offer a sauce that is close to the original Shack sauce that I grew up with. It’s my favorite sauce for barbecue pork.”

JACK SUNDELL
THE ROOT CAFE

TAQUERIA SAMANTHA II



CHORIZO QUESADILLA, STRAIGHT UP, ADD AN EGG

“I can’t stop myself from getting the same thing every time. It’s huge—it could easily feed two people—but it’s so delicious you won’t want to share. And it’s a glorious mess. It comes with a whole grilled jalapeño and green salsa, and by the end, chorizo grease will be dripping down your arms as you cry spicy tears of joy.”

BEN BRAINARD
LOCAL LIME AND HEIGHTS
TACO & TAMALES CO.

LULU’S LATIN ROTISSERIE AND GRILL

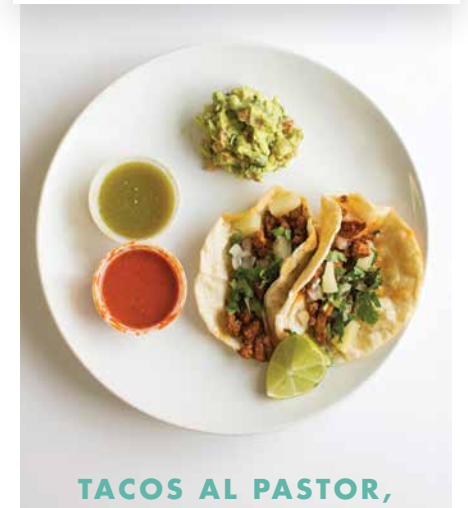


THE “FAMILY PACK”: A WHOLE ROTISSERIE CHICKEN WITH THREE SIDES. ALL OF THE SAUCES.

“We eat out a lot. With our schedules and the kids’ activities, there’s rarely enough time. Thankfully, there’s Lulu’s—it’s delicious food made by a couple of folks that really know what they’re doing. Get the yucca fries, the black beans and rice, and the plantains. All four of us eat for about \$6.75 a person. Give them a try, um, immediately.”

CAPI PECK
TRIO’S

TAQUERIA EL PALENQUE



TACOS AL PASTOR, TACOS ARRIAGA AND GUACAMOLE

“I love so many things at this little gem—it’s fresh, fast, friendly service and so close to both work and home. I used to have to drive to southwest Little Rock to get this kind of Mexican food. For a long time, I was one of the few gringas eating there, but now lots of people have discovered El Palenque!”

HOW TO EAT

EAT THIS PHOTO MEXICAN AND MEDITERRANEAN
PIZZAS AT PIZZA CAFE: \$13-\$18

MEDITERRANEAN

BEST VALUE

AL SERAJ MEDITERRANEAN RESTAURANT

11400 N. Rodney Parham Road, Little Rock; (501) 954-2026

Aside from belly-dancing music and the savory aroma wafting from the vertical broiler, there's another thing the folks at Al Seraj get right: They can whip up a mighty fine shawarma sandwich. We'll be honest: It's a messy affair—a sauce-dripping-down-elbow, mouth-hovering-close-to-plate kind of situation. But if it's between making a good impression on a first date or eating Al Seraj's pita sandwiches uninhibited, we'll always pick the latter.

YOU'RE GETTING: Plan all you want, but the truth is that you'll change your mind once you're there. Can't decide? Nibble on a bit of everything during the lunch buffet, offered 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. for just \$10.

ANTHONY'S ITALIAN RESTAURANT

3115 Kavanaugh Road, Fort Smith; (479) 222-6808

Served in an Olive Garden atmosphere without the high school memories and pricey menus (but very much *with* the same guilt induced by a death-by-carb-type situation), Anthony's portions are generous, the waiters are friendly, and the food is reliably delicious. And although it's quite a challenge to get to—one of those I-can-see-it-but-I-can't-reach-it situations—it's well worth a couple of loops around the block.

YOU'RE GETTING: Spaghetti smothered in rich meat sauce. Or order the special, and get \$2 off a bottle of wine. (That'll likely bump the cap above \$20. But booze.)

MORINA'S ITALIAN RESTAURANT

2006 S. Pine St., Cabot; (501) 941-7000

Set against a brown-and-beige-hued backdrop decorated with framed Da Vinci prints and photographs of Italy's tourist attractions, Morina's serves the kind of no-frills Italian comfort food that we'd want on a Friday night. Sure, it's a bit of drive from Little Rock. But that basket of glistening bread rolls ushered in upon arrival (and, to our diets' dismay, periodically refilled)? Totally worth the pilgrimage. (If you're looking to stay a little closer to Little Rock, there's always Morina's sister restaurant, Roma's, in Jacksonville.)

YOU'RE GETTING: The Diavolo, a chicken breast sautéed with garlic and shallots on a bed of spaghetti—a little spicy, a little creamy and all around delicious.

PETRA CAFE

31 E. Center St., Suite 101, Fayetteville; (479) 443-3090

What this teensy cafe—like, three-tables teensy—off the Fayetteville Square lacks in size, it more than makes up for in big, fresh flavors. Owner Saleh Faur makes the kind of food that not only tasted good back in your hungover college days (think: herb-studded tabbouleh, zippy tahini sauce and plump falafel), but also still holds up years later.



YOU'RE GETTING: The Petra Platter—falafel (“think Mediterranean hush puppy here,” says the menu), tabbouleh and baba ghanoush—when it's on special. Oh, heck. Even when it's not.

LEO'S GREEK CASTLE

2925 Kavanaugh Blvd., Little Rock; (501) 666-7414

Dump your heat-and-eat, cardboard-scented frozen falafels, and try some authentic offerings. Because here's the deal: They're practically the same price at Leo's Greek Castle—and with this Hillcrest institution's cozy atmosphere and 75-cent PBRs, you'll feel right at home.

YOU'RE GETTING: Anything enveloped in that warm flatbread—be it falafel or generous hunks of gyro meat topped with cool, creamy tzatziki.

PIZZA CAFE

1517 Rebsamen Park Road, Little Rock; (501) 664-6133
14710 Cantrell Road, Little Rock; (501) 868-2600

It's true: There's a lot of good pizza in Arkansas—some of which is on our “Top Five” list above; some of which didn't quite make the “cheap-eats” cut. So why *this* place? For starters, that crust—so good that Pizza Cafe offers up honey on the side so you can make the most of every last bite. And then there's the super-fresh, chock-full-of-veggies salads—not an iota of iceberg in sight. And then there's the clever specialty pizzas ... you get the gist.

YOU'RE GETTING: One of the specialty pizzas (that's the Mediterranean and the Mexican in the photo at left) and a Freaks & Geeks salad with house vinaigrette to share.

SALT & PEPPER MIDDLE EASTERN RESTAURANT

9700 N. Rodney Parham Road, Little Rock;
(501) 246-5002

When we first popped into Salt & Pepper, casting a sidelong glance at Cupid's Lingerie's scantily clad mannequins next door, the *foul*—that fava bean dip often considered Egypt's national dish—was a no-brainer. Also a no-brainer: scooping it up and shoveling it down with the eatery's medium-pizza-sized, hot-to-the-touch “special” Iraqi bread (so special we had to order seconds and thirds).

YOU'RE GETTING: The aforementioned dip and bread. And the chicken tikka.

TOP FIVE PIZZAS

Spicy Vegetable/ Chicken Pizza

Brick Oven Pizza Co.,
Russellville



Clean the Floor

Iriana's Pizza, Little Rock



Judy's Favorite

U.S. Pizza Co., Multiple
locations



Vino's Special

Vino's Brewpub,
Little Rock



Artichoke Chicken

Pizza Cafe,
Little Rock



Oh, and lentil soup. (You'll have no choice in the matter, nor should you. The soup is delicious, free and served in an ornate, antique-y silver bowl—very Instagram-worthy.)

BEST VALUE

LAYLA'S GYRO

Multiple locations; laylasgyro.com

There's nothing special about the ambiance at Layla's, but everything special about the calzones. These pizzas-with-a-roof are hearty offerings, the kind that make you consider forgoing your dinner-and-a-movie plans and just heading home to bed. But there's always some Turkish coffee, served in an *ibrik* (aka cool-looking copper pot), to perk you up long enough to end the evening on a sweet note (aka Layla's baklava).

YOU'RE GETTING: The gyro calzone. Duh. Stuffed with gooey cheese and gyro meat, the piping-hot pocket of goodness is the most popular item on the menu.

TANGIERS MEDITERRANEAN FOOD & CAFE

2800 N. College Ave., Fayetteville; (479) 301-2211

Nestled in a stucco-facaded strip mall that hardly suggests the vibrancy of Moroccan cuisine is some killer food worthy of a name like “Tangiers.” Take the chicken curry kebab gyro, for instance—a trip to the Mediterranean with a pit stop in South Asia. Or the desserts scribbled above “sold out” on the chalkboard menu, like ladyfingers and baklava prepared by the experienced hands of a Moroccan baker.

YOU'RE GETTING: That chicken curry kebab or a kefta gyro with soft pita and juicy meat. And the fries ... oh, the fries.

VENEZIA'S PIZZA & PASTA

1321 E. Main St., Russellville; (479) 968-2588

A gem that's by no means hidden, Venezia's screams Italian with its boldly striped red, green and white roof. But you'll quickly forget about all that when you dig into dishes that seem to transcend the tacky exterior—and perhaps even justify it. (You'll also ignore the wide-eyed gondolier judgmentally staring from the wall mural as you wolf down two baskets of house-baked, fresh-from-the-oven rolls before the waitress even takes your order.)

YOU'RE GETTING: Cannelloni stuffed with creamy ricotta, beef and spinach tucked under a blanket of melty Parmesan and a hearty eggplant Parmigiana, both served with a side salad during lunch. Yum's the word.

DOING THE MATH



Never had *nopales*? Neither had we. Our take? Delish.

Simple, fresh toppings—cilantro, radishes, white onions—are all these tacos need.

Make sure to squeeze those limes over the ceviche. (They're there for a reason, after all.)

HERE'S HOW WE FIGURED OUT IF A LOCAL RESTAURANT QUALIFIED AS A "CHEAP EAT": COULD TWO PEOPLE EAT A COMPLETE MEAL THERE FOR UNDER \$20? AT SOME PLACES, LIKE **ELIELLA RISTORANTE** ON BASELINE ROAD IN LITTLE ROCK, OUR JACKSON WENT PRETTTTTY DARN FAR.

HOW WE SPENT OUR \$20

1 *al pastor* taco: \$1.50

1 chorizo taco: \$1.50

1 *lengua* taco: \$1.50

1 *taco de cabeza*: \$1.50

1 *tripa* taco: \$1.99

1 *tostada de ceviche*: \$3.50

1 order of *nopales*: \$1.99

1 order of chips: \$1.49

1 side of guacamole: \$1.25

1 side of fruit: \$2

1 flan (not pictured—Start with dessert, right?): \$2

TOTAL:
\$20.22

(Eh. What's 22 cents?)

HOW TO EAT SOUTHERN

\$ = cash only



STAFF FAVORITE

CECI'S CHICKEN & WAFFLES

324 E. 13th St., North Little Rock; (501) 372-1121

Chances are the folks at Ceci's Chicken & Waffles will be able to tell if it's your first time at this easy-to-miss North Little Rock establishment. After all, that expression you'll have in the presence of a fluffy waffle piled with fried chicken, powdered sugar, strawberries and whipped cream—or pecans and caramel—is just about guaranteed to give you away. And with more traditional eats such as pork chops, greens and yams, too, we're sure that first visit won't be your last.

YOU'RE GETTING: A lovely sugar rush and sticky fingers.

BELLWOOD DINER \$

3815 MacArthur Drive, North Little Rock; (501) 753-1012

You probably wouldn't expect a meat-and-three order that's \$6.50 to be this hefty. But it is. A massive fried chicken breast served with country-style mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese, coleslaw or any of the other daily menu offerings is sure to fill even the emptiest of stomachs. But don't just consider this place for lunch: No item on the highly raved-about breakfast menu is over \$6. Pro tip: Bring cash, or else take a stroll to the ATM next door.

YOU'RE GETTING: Fried chicken—and wishing you'd made it in time for a full stack of pancakes.

BEST
VALUE

JERKY'S SPICY CHICKEN AND MORE

521 Center St., Little Rock; (501) 246-3096

Sure, the flavors from this jerk-chicken joint borrow from an area so Southern that it reaches beyond the United States—but still, its techniques are presented in a way that's both familiar and exciting to the American tongue (a fusion the restaurant has dubbed "Jamerican"). We're talking sauce with the perfect blend of tang and spice atop some of the most succulent ribs and chicken around.

YOU'RE GETTING: The two-piece chicken snack, and you're debating the jerk-chicken tacos. Do it.

DOWNHOME RESTAURANT & CATERING

9219 Stagecoach Road, Little Rock; (501) 821-3344

Looking around at DownHome Restaurant's vintage décor feels like coming home—thank goodness it tastes like it, too. Heaping servings of meatloaf, hamburger steak and lasagna take you back to weeknights at the dinner table or—even better—Sunday dinner.

Just don't tell mom this stuff comes close to hers.

YOU'RE GETTING: Chicken spaghetti with macaroni and cheese and perfectly crisp fried okra.

EAT MY CATFISH

2125 Harkrider St., Conway; (501) 588-1867
1205 Military Road, Benton; (501) 909-2323

Listen, just consider the name an imperative—but don't stop there. This Conway and Benton eatery, which got its start as a Benton food truck, offers more than just filling catfish fillets, crawfish, crab, shrimp and po'boys (though you shouldn't hesitate to try them, too.) Whatever you do, don't miss a taste of that signature tartar sauce.

YOU'RE GETTING: The two-piece catfish dinner, though we wouldn't judge you for upsizing.

FEASTROS

4200 E. Kiehl Ave., Sherwood; (501) 864-7860

You'll face mouthwatering options here. Lots of them. This buffet-style Sherwood barbecue spot allows you to stay the more traditional route with ribs, baked beans and potato salad. But why not throw in pasta and enchiladas for the heck of it? Drop in on a chance "Seafood Saturday," and you might just walk out with a stomachful of crab legs.

YOU'RE GETTING: Rib tips—lots of rib tips.

HOMER'S RESTAURANT

2001 E. Roosevelt Road, Little Rock; (501) 374-1400;
9700 N. Rodney Parham Road, Little Rock; (501) 224-6637

In its own words, Homer's specializes in "good eats." And with said offerings vibrantly written on the wall-sized chalkboard, you won't miss what it has to offer. Country-fried steak served daily. A catfish special in the middle of the week. Another catfish deal on Friday. Rolls the size of a breakfast muffin—plus the tried-and-true-sides of pickled okra and pinto beans.

YOU'RE GETTING: Cajun fried catfish on Wednesday, but you'll probably be back for more come Friday.

LINDSEY'S HOSPITALITY HOUSE AND BAR-B-QUE

207 Curtis Sykes Drive, North Little Rock; (501) 374-5707

With the cashier sporting a welcoming grin while kindly referring to you as "Miss" or "Sir," you're paying for more than just good barbecue at Lindsey's Hospitality House—though that certainly is the draw here. Bishop Donne Lee Lindsey Sr.'s North Little Rock barbecue-legacy-slash-banquet-hall uses its signature cookin' to bring you around—and its specialty sauce to bring you back.

YOU'RE GETTING: The smoked-chicken dinner (assuming you need a break from all things fried).

EAT THIS
PHOTO
CARMEL-
PECAN
CHICKEN
AND
WAFFLE
AT CECI'S
CHICKEN &
WAFFLES:
\$8.99

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TOP FIVE CATFISH

Small catfish dinner

Nick's Bar-B-Q
and Catfish,
Carlisle



Four-piece catfish dinner

Lindsey's
Hospitality House
and Bar-B-Que,
North Little Rock



Two-piece catfish dinner

Eat My Catfish,
Conway



American catfish fillet

Love's Fish
Market, Little
Rock



Small fish dinner

Kitchen Express,
Little Rock



NICK'S BAR-B-Q AND CATFISH

1012 Bobby L. Glover Highway, Carlisle;
(870) 552-3887

Nick's Bar-B-Q is pretty fond of pigs, as evidenced by the adorable, homey knickknacks around the restaurant. But those curly-tailed figurines are sure to be forgotten on the quick once the real thing—juicy, tender meat in rib or pulled form—reaches the table. This Carlisle mainstay serves the finest of other meats, too, including beef, chicken, shrimp, catfish and sausage.

YOU'RE GETTING: The smoked sausage dinner and onion rings the size of an oversized bracelet.

THE OYSTER BAR

3003 W. Markham St., Little Rock; (501) 666-7100

You can't quite experience a taste of the South without a mouthful or two of seafood. (And no, not just the catfish you can order anywhere in the state.) For a quick-and-easy bite of New Orleans' famous sea-based sandwich, The Oyster Bar offers a variety of po'boys under \$10.

YOU'RE GETTING: A po'boy stuffed with shrimp. Or fried oysters. Or fried clams. Or fried crawfish tails.