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The behemoth of buffets beckons: There's more, if you like

The Shady Maple Smorgasbord is not about fine dining, it's about chowing down

Gary Soulsman

NJ

By GARY SOULSMAN The News Journal

EAST EARL, Pa. - My friend is not a tie-on-the-feedbag kind of gal.

She's particular in her eating, and has earned the right, having lived in India, Japan and Switzerland, where she ate quite well.

So I was surprised when she handed me a glossy brochure for a paradise of pigging out - Lancaster County's largest all-you-can-eat buffet.

"Oh Gary," she said. "You have to see it."

She says I should experience the mightiness of what the Lord has wrought at Shady Maple Smorgasbord. It means an hour and half road trip, but my friend insists that I drive past the vistas of farmland and the Wawa at Gap, where the gas was selling 40 cents cheaper than in Delaware (Wa-wa-wow), so that I might stand in awe before a Grand Canyon of gustatory excess.

"Gustatory excess."

Now, there's a phrase that makes you want to bow your head, grab a plate and loosen your belt. And I was willing - for I do not fear the slowed working of brain cells and capillaries from a swollen belly.

Verily, this is how it goes. He who walks through the valley of an endless buffet must hobble away.

I was aware of this when I made the trip and saw folks who seemed as if they needed levers and pulleys to hoist themselves out the door. They were lumbering out as we hurried up to what looked like a big brick ocean liner of a building in the tiny town of East Earl, Pa.

The we in question? Mike Barko and Suzanne Loudermilk.

Mike is chairman of the wine committee at the University and Whist Club. He's a former waiter and cook as well as a former manager at Sambo's restaurants.

"I have varicose veins," he says. "Those are my credentials."

The great thing about Mike, besides his lighthearted spirit, is that he has a system for chowing down. He doesn't pile a plate with shovel-sized servings like so many. "I'm a grazer," he says. How does he know if he's going to want a Lake Superior-size serving of creamed Vidalia onions? He starts with a thimble size and, if he's impressed, he takes a swim in the great lake of creamy eating.

Suzanne is an editor and loves to write about food when she's not eating ample quantities of her own cooking. She has a certificate de cuisine from La Varenne, in France, but is just as happy making meatloaf as boeuf bourguignonne.

A contented threesome with visions of endless eating, we rode up from Delaware and arrived at 12:30 p.m. I had risen at 6 and had not eaten breakfast, so I was ready for a jamboree of gorging.

Unfortunately, I had agreed to meet the mastermind of Shady Maple. Sadly, this whole journalism thing is always getting in the tongue's way.

I called owner Marvin Weaver from the parking lot. Surely, I thought, in a half hour we'll be blessed with an embarrassment of buffet choices. I'd been told it takes two or three visits to try everything. I wanted to get started.

We waited in the foyer. It's a honkingly huge place that reminded me of a hotel lobby impersonating a new model home.

Everything about Shady Maple is jumbo-to-the-max - from the restaurant (It seats 1,200) to the downstairs gift shop (It's the size a large

department store or small Central American country).

In 20 minutes, a tall gentleman in a white shirt and thick white hair appears. Mr. Weaver is gracious and businesslike in a way that is humble, friendly and no-nonsense. And, if there is something to know about a man who started with just himself and his wife and now has 700 employees, it's that he never does anything half way.

When he gives a tour he gives something akin to the grand tour of Europe, which lasts several weeks. And so my friends and I unwittingly set sail.

Mr. Weaver starts in the dining room, pointing out the hand-carved 3-D scenes of Amish life that grace his walls.

Quite lifelike, we agree sagely, as we glance toward where we imagine a buffet line is hiding.

Next Mr. Weaver shows us a room larger than many high school gyms. He'd originally built the chandeliered and carpeted hall for weddings and banquets. But it was never used for that. In 2002, as soon he opened the new 110,000-square-foot version of his restaurant, he needed extra seating. It paid off on Mother's Day, when he served 9,000.

Then I make a hasty mistake, like many a reporter who forgets his stomach. I ask Mr. Weaver how all this came to be.

He looks at me for a hard country moment. Then he launches into the Odyssey of the Fruit Stand.

In the Odyssey he is a young man. And the gods call him to a fruit stand under two tall maple trees - hence the name, Shady Maple. Here cupid shoots an arrow.

And Mr. Weaver, who was probably known as Marvin then, is struck by the arrow, falling for the daughter of the owners. She is Miriam Martin.

Marvin and Miriam wed and he wants to go into dairy farming. She wants to run the fruit stand.

As Mr. Weaver says, sometimes your wife is right when she says "no stinking cows."

So with the dawning of the Age of Aquarius in the '70s, they expand the fruit stand. They add a grocery. Soon they're running a cafeteria, then smoking meat.

The next thing you know Shady Maple isn't just a grocery, it's a restaurant seating 300. They add fresh-baked goods and everything is a hullabaloo, especially now that they have three kids.

On it goes until he dreams of this ocean liner of a restaurant pretty darn close to where the fruit stand once stood.

But what really stops the heart is to learn that the 59-year-old farm boy did this with an eighth-grade education. What have I done besides produce this feeling of hunger?

And now that we've heard The Odyssey of the Fruit Stand, our hero is pumped to show us the innards of the enterprise. We follow and for one shining moment I catch sight of a zigzagging mirage of chrome and glass and lights.

That must be it - the buffet of legendary length. I hear its siren song.

But Mr. Weaver waves it off as if it's a cousin that has offended him. "Let me show you the kitchen," he says.

Oh no, I think. This man has eaten breakfast and probably lunch.

He says that he's lost 60 pounds, dropping from a high of 275. The breads and desserts of the siren sing to him less and less.

He's launched us on a mission to see what keeps this ship of food afloat, from the freezers to the employee lounge to the gift shop to the automatic washers to the trash compactors to the electricity controls.

We go on and on, until amazement turns to heartbreak.

A stickler for detail, Mr. Weaver pauses in front of the cheesesteak grill to clean around the edges.

"I was on the grill earlier today," he says.

What level of hell is this? I wonder. We are so close to nirvana.

I can smell, not just the cheesesteak, but the slow-roasted chuck that poets have written about. And the fajitas. Across the way they are sizzling.

"The fajitas really go," Mr. Weaver says.

Imagine that, in Lancaster County, I want to say.

But I've lost the will to speak. In the midst of my desperation I meet a woman at the buffet from Newark. She is Rita Nefosky and she is 72.

Age means nothing to Rita because she has dessert. She has all the dessert she wants - chocolate éclair, cherry cobbler, lemon squares and sundaes of every sort.

I want to be Rita Nefosky.

She is with her husband, Bill, and two friends. "We come here all the time," she says.

She and her friend joke about how they used to be a size six. I laugh but I imagine running off with her coconut pie. Then, I think, it's better to die a hungry death than to steal from a senior with an endless supply of food.

Surely, the tour must end soon. It's 2:30.

At 2:35, Pharaoh is ready to let his people go. And suddenly I am looking down two-thirds of a football field of chrome and glass and É food, blessed food.

Mike Barko says that actually the buffet is longer than a football field because there's food on each side. And there are stations for grilling fish and meats. Stations for bread. Stations for coffee, sodas and cappuccino.

I suppress an impulse to kick him and set off with a plate.

I sample the cheesesteak (soft roll and juicy meat, nicely salted, not too spicy), try the braised brisket (fork-tender), forgo the Vidalia creamed onion (Mike likes them), dip into scalloped corn pudding and am not impressed (It's missing Lancaster County toasted and dried corn, which is no longer available to Shady Maple - Mr. Weaver wishes he had a supply) and stick a fork into the grilled salmon (flaky, tender).

This has taken the edge off my hunger, and I'm hunkering down for some serious sampling. So are Mike and Suzanne and the families all around us. The place is filled with families.

We're motoring back and forth to the buffet, dirty plates flying off the table as we set them aside.

The thick doughy pizza is Tony's Red Baron brand that we could have gotten at the grocery. But Suzanne points out that pizza needs to be on the menu because it's one of the few things kids will eat.

That and macaroni and cheese and French fries. Mr. Weaver says that he moves amazing quantities of fries.

Briefly we debate the mashed potatoes. An insider told us they're from a box, though they've been doctored to the point of being darn edible. Mike guesses it's because of mayonnaise or lots of cream.

Then it's on to dessert. An apple dumpling is warm and soothing, and I usually hate apple desserts.

Mike gives a big thumbs-up to the sweet potato pie. Then to my surprise he and Suzanne give up. We're 45 minutes into serious eating and they're ready to visit the Shady Maple Market next door?

I dismiss this as folly. You see, I've still got room for pecan pie, though I rate it ho-hum and mainly eat off the pecans. Then I discover the sundae bar - Turkey Hill soft ice cream and all sorts of nuts, berries and chocolate toppings.

Now I am sitting on the siren's lap making goo-goo eyes. For I have found my favorite item on the buffet. So I go for seconds.

But something happens. Seismic forces shift in the lower half of my body. My stomach sends out a warning beep like a truck backing up. The sound grows louder.

Suddenly, I feel like I need levers and pulleys to move from my chair. Then I experience a wave of self-loathing.

Why did God give me an appetite? What have I done to lose this much control of my limbs?

I'm having trouble walking but make it next door where I stumble around the supermarket until I find Suzanne and Mike. He's buying sweetbreads and smoked duck.

They look worried about me. Since I am their driver, they know I need at least a smattering of energy not devoted to digestion to get them home.

"Are you all right?" Mike asks.

I lie and say that I am. They pay for their groceries, and misery walks with us back to the car.

Mike chatters about the garden center. I wonder did he moderate his appetite? That cheater.

Then Mike says what I don't have the brains to think.

"Your world traveling friend was correct," he says. "People need to come here and see for themselves."

Contact Gary Soulsman at 324-2893 or

gsoulsman@delawareonline.com. This writer normally writes about religion. It may have been a mistake to introduce him to a buffet with more than 100 items.

IF YOU GO

Shady Maple Smorgasbord

WHERE: 129 Toddy Drive, East Earl, Pa.

DIRECTIONS: From I-95, take Del. 141 north to Kirkwood Highway south/west. Turn right at Del. 41. Follow for 28 miles to U.S. 30 in Gap, Pa. Turn right on 30 then within the next minute make a left on Pa. 897. Follow 897 to East Earl. At a T intersection, make a left on U.S. 322. Shady Maple is high on a hill about a mile on the right. Trip takes about an hour and a half from Wilmington.

INFORMATION: (717) 354-8222 or www.shady-maple.com

WHEN: Breakfast 5-10 a.m.; lunch 11 a.m. to 3:15 p.m.; dinner 4-8 p.m. weekdays; Saturday dinner 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Closed Sunday.

PRICES: Tax and service fee included. Breakfast \$8.54 to \$9.68; weekdays are less. Lunch \$10.82 weekdays, \$17.09 for Saturday dinner. (crab cakes, salmon, cajun catfish and grilled meats)

Dinner varies with the day. Monday (Delmonico steak and New York strip steak specials) \$15.61. Tuesday (seafood specials) \$20.17. Wednesday (prime rib special) \$16.75. Thursday (grilled chicken breast special) \$14.47. Friday (fried shrimp, grilled fish and meats specials) \$15.95.

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