

## GOOD FOOD, GREAT ATMOSPHERE

*by Fred Hobbs*

Some people live to eat. Everyone eats to live. A good friend of mine chooses not only to acknowledge, but to embrace, the sentiment as well as the veracity of that latter statement. Allan says he literally eats only to live. He doesn't seem truly to enjoy any food and when a discussion about favorite restaurants comes up, he generally reminds me that he doesn't particularly care for any of them. Boy, is he missing out on a large measure of pleasure! I love to eat and I enjoy experiencing a variety of restaurants, at least to the extent my budget will allow.

At the public relations agency I used to operate, a publication called *Restaurant News of the Rockies* was one of the clients. Our staff wrote stories for the monthly newspaper, principally about the most recent new restaurant openings, along with success stories of owners, managers and chefs and new trends in the industry.

We learned a lot about the elements, which combined, create and sustain the popularity of a restaurant. A tad short of being a gourmand, one who is excessive in the enjoyment of eating, I nonetheless assumed that the quality of the food served was the most important factor. In a recent national survey of top factors in restaurant success, quality of food actually rated 7<sup>th</sup>, behind location listed as 3<sup>rd</sup>. Having a validated concept was named number one.

Embodied in all this is the atmosphere of the place. For the consumer, atmosphere may seem less important. In some ways it's subliminal.

The diner walks into a place and isn't always aware of the atmosphere created by the owner and the staff. But somehow a feeling is registered quite apart from the food itself or the service provided.

It's important to know that atmosphere doesn't necessarily mean fancy or upscale; the word simply describes the surrounding influence of the restaurant. A burger joint, a sports bar or an IHOP each have distinctive atmospheres with the common thread of informality. Simple décor, loud talk, TV screens showing the latest games or little kids babbling away as they down their chocolate pancakes; these are staples in those successful and popular places.

So-called family-friendly casual dining places often feature an atmosphere of comfortable booths, somewhat subdued lighting, and "home cooking" styled menus with items such as meat loaf and chicken potpie. Kids seem to behave themselves better in those places.

But, if it's capital letter ATMOSPHERE the customer is seeking, the category is "fine dining." Featured is beautiful décor (whatever that means), food prepared by renowned chefs, a pricey menu with a lot of French terms printed on it, perhaps a snooty waiter from "the old country." To those with relatively unsophisticated tastes and modest pecuniary proclivities (cheap!), the atmosphere in these places may be a little uncomfortable.

Judging from the conversations of my family and peers and from the millions who flock to dining establishments all around the world, my friend Allan, atmosphere notwithstanding, remains alone in his behavior of eating only to live.

Bon appetit!