

Three-conomics

Fixed-price dinners are turning three courses into a stimulus package for Austin restaurants and the people who love them

By Mike Sutter

AMERICAN-STATESMAN RESTAURANT CRITIC

OK, wise guys. When I put out the call for fixed-price dinners for less than \$50, more than one e-mail suggested Wendy's or McDonald's. Their 'fixed-price combos,' with fries (or apple slices!), a drink and fun-on-a-bun actually cost less than \$50. For 10 of them. Hoo-ha! You got me there.

But what to do when a special occasion — a birthday, a night without the kids, still having a job after the buyout — calls for something more (for somewhat less)? Nice restaurants need you as badly as you need them right now, and they're ready to deal. Fixed-price dinners (or prix fixe — pronounced 'pree feeks' — if you prefer) help put customers at tables that might sit empty otherwise.

Call it a combo meal with cloth napkins: appetizer, main course and dessert for a lower price than if you ordered them separately.

Sometimes the math works, sometimes it doesn't. The fixed-price model often means smaller portions, so it's hard to calculate the bargain you're getting. But the usual appetizer price plus the main-course price usually comes close to the total fixed price. Anything else is gravy. Or dessert.

Here are fixed-price reviews of five places I've tried in the past few weeks, plus a list of other notable fixed-price values around town. The star ratings (one to five) are based on the food, experience and value of the fixed-price experience.

Let's say this straight-out: You can smoke at Cool River, cigarettes in the bar, cigars in the plush, leathery lounge. You can also escape the smoke — as if it never existed — in the expansive main dining room. Part boys club, part pickup bar, part upscale steakhouse with an encyclopedic wine list. Cool River has room for it all, plus pool tables, shuffleboard and a theater-sized TV screen.

What Cool River also has is a fixe-price dinner for \$29.99 and a waiter who helped me get the most out of it. He was talkative and cordial, waving me away from a \$15 glass of wine he called 'horrible.' And when I spied a wine special (two half-glasses for \$15), he

customized it with two unlisted reds, stylistically polar Chilean and Californian pinot noirs to accent the duck I chose from the fixed-price main courses: duck, steak or tuna (the menu changes regularly).

I chose the duck in part because I like the idea of getting a deal on a dish that's usually

pretty expensive. We fixed-price people are like that. And the duck was seared perfectly, crisp on the outside, medium inside, served with a sweet raspberry reduction and grilled asparagus.

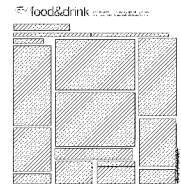
Bored with the notion of another fixed-price Caesar salad, I ordered soup, which turned out to be a one-note, oversalted beef-and-potato stew. And here's where service kept one little thing from hurting the overall visit. When I told my waiter, politely, about the soup, he didn't miss a beat, coming right back with (yes) a Caesar salad with big shavings of Parmesan cheese and coated generously with an anchovy dressing from before the time when Caesar became just another name for ranch.

The dining room was mostly empty (a heartbreak, given this fixed-price opportunity), allowing my waiter and me to talk long enough to find out our parents live in the same Fort Worth suburb and that we went to rival high schools. But always things came back around to food and wine, and he poured me a taste of a complex Rosenblum syrah and steered me toward a key lime dessert with light sponge cake, whipped cream and a jacket of white chocolate.

He also told me about the whole other side of Cool River, the raucous and clubby side. And my only regret was that I didn't have time for a cigar and coffee.

So the new 'Harry Potter' movie is out. The one where Harry drinks the Felix Felicis potion, the liquid luck that makes everything go just right for one magical day. We must have had a nip of that before we hit Jasper's, chef Kent Rathbun's high-ceilinged temple to food that tastes great but can't possibly be good for you.

For one thing, Rathbun himself was



sitting two tables away having a business dinner, which meant our service would be great. It was, the best I've ever had in Austin, courses moving fluidly in and out, silverware replaced, conversation focused on the food — something that continued even after the big man left. Most important, our waiter told us something we didn't know about Jasper's four-course chef's tasting menu for \$35: if you want something besides that night's set list of courses, just ask. Chances are, it can be substituted.

Here's what we did. Both of us had a Caesar salad, that staple of the fixed-price dinner, this one distinguished by focaccia croutons with sun-dried tomatoes. And both of us had pecan-crust ed trout, two crisp filets with a Jim Beam butter sauce and molasses sweet potatoes that we're still talking about.

Then the whirlwind started, my guest going for a flat-iron steak — sliced and layered on the plate — with crisp green beans and a tart vinaigrette to complement the deep-red richness of the meat and roasted mushrooms. For me, a tender barbecued pork tenderloin with bourbon creamed corn and a peach sauce crowned with fried curls of potato was a study in how plating, texture and flavor can make a dish better than the sum of its parts.

For an extra \$20 each, we opted to let Jasper's pair wines with each course, starting with a bright Edna Valley chardonnay and a grassy Forefathers sauvignon blanc. Our waiter improvised for the steak and pork with Layer Cake malbec (spicy and volatile) and Sly Dog Cellars cabernet sauvignon (berries and caramel). Our luck held through dessert. French toast with ice cream, candied pecans and brûléed bananas was an architectural marvel, and cherry-limeade pie was like a custard cupcake with a graham cracker shell, perfect with the Taylor Fladgate and Fonseca ports served in glasses that looked a little bit like ... potion bottles.

We drove ourselves crazy trying to figure out whether we were getting a good fixed-price deal for \$38 at Olivia, the angular avant bistro so well-designed by Michael Hsu. Each dinner includes an appetizer, salad and main course, plus a scoop of housemade ice cream

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(try the ginger, studded with nut brittle), and the normal prices run \$6-\$18 for appetizers, \$8-\$10 for salads and \$22-\$30 for the dishes marked with asterisks as fixed-price options

on Olivia's regular menu, which changes daily. But our waiter said the fixed-price portions are smaller, so we gave up on the bean counting.

What I got in the course of two fixed-price dinners was a taste of the misgivings I have about Olivia: that one side of the table can have something great while the other side can only look down and wonder why he didn't order that, too. A case in point was a crunchy fan of thin, fried pork jowl, tender enough to cut with a fork, served with crisped white asparagus and rough, beefy morel mushrooms in a tangy warm mustard sauce. The interplay of flavors and textures — cream, crunch, savory, smoke — was a true work of kitchen alchemy that paired equally well with a soft glass of Côtes du Rhône (from Olivia's truly weird and wonderful wine list) and a pint of Devil's Backbone Belgian-style beer from Real Ale.

At the other side of the table, though, was an unsuspecting piece of redfish overwhelmed by garlic, bacon, undercooked black lentils and for some reason, okra. The flavors all worked hard, but in opposite directions.

The salad course presented the same dichotomy, the winner getting a layered beet salad with Pure Luck feta cheese and red onion, the other a wan stack of Romaine leaves with a sliver of white anchovy. We called the appetizers a draw, both of us satisfied with a scallop tartare with avocado, caviar and ponzu sauce (though the scallop had started to go mealy) and a creamy gazpacho with the cool sweetness of peach and melon and a hot jalapeño finish.

With a few drinks, tax and tip, the bill nudged toward \$120, close to what I paid on my last two-person visit to Olivia, without the fixed-price option but with the same mixed results. Next time, I'll order whatever the person across from me is having.

When I asked about the happy-hour menu (\$4-\$7 appetizers, \$5 glasses of wine from 5 to 7 p.m. Monday-Friday and 5 to 9 p.m. Sun-

day), I was given an unflattering once-over. 'Oh, that's only in the bar,' where there were no empty seats, so I walked crestfallen to my seat in a back room of this ... 'castle' is the right word, a stage of sorts, majestically shielded by trees from the sights and sounds of Loop 360 nearby.

For \$35, this Tuscan-inspired Italian restaurant serves an ever-changing three-course chef's menu with choices in each appetizer, main course and dessert category. I started with ravioli, simple pasta with a firm bite, good cheese and too much salt. My waitress made apologies, and with lightning grace substituted a salad of ruby and gold roasted beets, a balance of warm sweetness (though the candied walnuts went one step too far) with the piquancy of goat cheese and a light, truffled vinaigrette.

A pair of venison rib chops exploded with steam from the chard at their core, a well-constructed dish with thyme-herbed fingerling potatoes for structure and height, the ribs crossed on top of them, chard and shiitake mushrooms cascading to a deep, savory wine sauce. The blood-iron taste of the venison — with grill marks on just one side, a technique that kept them tender, which is no easy feat — worked in earthy tandem with the potatoes and mushrooms. I surreptitiously gnawed on

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the rib bones right there at the table.

For dessert, a chocolate tort with a warm ganache center was crowned with grappa-soaked cherries, the whole enterprise resting in a pool of espresso cream laced with cherry sauce.

I saw neither the beet salad nor the venison on the main menu, but similar dishes ran \$11 and \$29, making my full-sized fixed-price portions an extraordinary value in this castle where happy hours and specials conspire to create royalty from recession.

Halfway through dinner at Trio, the burnt orange-appointed steakhouse at the Four Seasons Hotel, came a poignant case of why restaurants are trying everything they can to draw business. Our waiter told us that because business was so slow, they were sending some people home, and he was one of them.

True, we were one of only a handful of tables. But the service and the food never slipped. In fact, the sous chef himself took pains to cut a two-bone Niman Ranch pork chop in half for us, bringing it back out to the table with extra servings of the muscat grape chutney that gave the seared meat its sweet and sour notes. The great thing about well-sourced pork? It can be cooked medium-rare for a juicy tenderness, like a steak.

The chop was part of a three-course fixed price dinner for \$39 that started with a whole grilled quail on an abundant bed of peaches and herbs (insert 'Reunited' joke here) and ended with a nostalgic reimagining of s'mores: dense graham crackers with a toasted mound of marshmallow and a disc of smooth chocolate ganache that faltered only with the incongruous addition of cloying root beer gel. But a crunch-studded scoop of graham cracker ice cream more than made up for that.

The math worked out like this: The quail is \$12 on its own, the pork chop \$23, for a total of \$35. For our additional \$4, we got dessert and sides of mashed potato and spinach. Not to mention hot Parmesan popovers.

The economics held up for another \$39 fixed-price dinner of al dente tomato ravioli surrounded by pearls of farm cheese and heirloom tomatoes, grilled flat-iron steak with a salty-sweet puree of wine and shallots and a trio of tart sorbets: lemon, raspberry (both serviceable) and mango (exceptional). The ravioli and steak carry a combined sticker price of \$37, making the \$39 price for the dessert and sides a good deal.

For the steak, though, I'd have liked two things. One, more of that shallot sauce to energize the dry meat. To be fair, it also came with a trio of spicy, sweet and buttery sauces, but none as good. And two, flat-iron steak isn't the prettiest cut of meat. By itself on a long white plate, it's a thin, homely slab that would benefit from more imaginative plating (slicing, arranging, animal shapes, something).

And because we're talking about money, here's another save-and-splurge technique at Trio. Arrive early (5 to 8 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays), sit at the Trio bar and have a few half-price glasses of wine (Suavio Italian white for \$6 for a start) and some truffle fries for \$3.50. You've earned it.



Mike Sutter photos AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Cool River Cafe's fixed-price choices included seared duck breast with raspberry-balsamic reduction and asparagus, a Caesar salad and a Key lime calypso dessert.



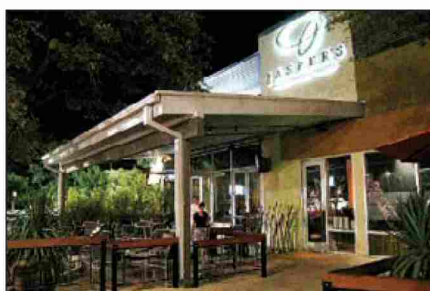
Jasper's did a fine job from start to finish, with dishes that included, clockwise from bottom left, pecan-crusted trout, Caesar salad, pork tenderloin and French toast dessert.

Cool River Cafe



- 4001 Parmer Lane. 835-0010, www.coolrivercafe.com.
- The fixed-price attraction: \$29.99 for soup or salad, main course and dessert. Available every night.
- Fixed-price rating: ★★★★★

Jasper's



- 11506 Century Oaks Terrace, Suite 128, at the Domain. 834-4111, www.jaspers-restaurant.com.
- The fixed-price attraction: \$35 four-course chef's tasting menu (includes dessert). Available every night.
- Fixed-price rating: ★★★★★



- See more photos of our featured fixed-price dinners at austin360.com/food.
- Have I missed your favorite fixed-price fine-dining deal? Please e-mail it to me at msutter@statesman.com.



Clockwise from left: fried pork jowls in a mustard cream sauce, beet salad with feta and red onion, scallop tartare in ponzu sauce and chocolate chesecake ice cream at Olivia.

Olivia



- 2043 S. Lamar Blvd. 804-2700, www.olivia-austin.com.
- The fixed-price attraction: \$38 for an appetizer, salad and main course, plus ice cream. Available Sundays through Tuesdays.
- Fixed-price rating: ★★★★★

Siena



- 6203 N. Capital of Texas Highway (Loop 360), Building B. 349-7667, www.sienarestaurant.com.
- The fixed-price attraction: \$35 chef's special menu with an appetizer, main course and dessert. Available every night.
- Fixed-price rating: ★★★★★



The selections on the chef's special menu at Siena included venison rib chops, a beet salad and a chocolate tort.

Trio



■ 98 San Jacinto Blvd. at the Four Seasons Hotel. 685-8300, www.fourseasons.com/austin.

■ The fixed-price attraction: \$39 for an appetizer, main course and dessert. Available every night.

■ Fixed-price rating: ★★☆☆



Clockwise from bottom left: grill quail and ravioli appetizers; Niman Ranch pork chop; and a trio of sorbets at Trio.