

Going out on a budget

By Kate Oczypok

With today's economy, many area chefs are offering specials at their respective restaurants to aid struggling families and young professionals. Many offered great suggestions for foods to try on a budget as well.

JAMIE LEEDS, CHEF, COMMONWEALTH: THE PEOPLE'S GASTROPUB

Jamie Leeds, chef of Commonwealth in Columbia Heights, offers a cup of soup, half a sandwich and half a pint of beer for \$10. The pub also offers free Wi-Fi.

As far as good foods to try in the economy, Leeds recommends one-pot dishes. "They're always good and inexpensive," she said. "Start with carrots, onion, celery, whatever you want to get rid of."

Leeds then said if you'd like to make the stew more filling, add potatoes or perhaps chicken thighs. If you enjoy foods with a kick, garbanzo beans and curry are good choices.

"Another good piece of advice is to try a less expensive cut of meat, like a leg of lamb or beef or pork shanks," Leeds said. "Chocolate pudding is also a great inexpensive and easy-to-serve dessert."

Leeds said that the economy hasn't hurt D.C. as much as it has other cities. "I think it affected more of the fine dining in D.C., but neighborhood establishments haven't been affected as much," she said. "The recent Cherry Blossom Festival and tourism helped as well."

Leeds said Commonwealth is a great place to dine out cheaply and "you end up eating a pretty hearty meal — you leave full."

DAN MESCHES, CEO, STIR FOOD GROUP

Meschés, whose company recently changed its name from the Star Restaurant Group to Stir Food Group, manages Zola and Potenza and also does catering at the International Spy Museum.

Potenza, which recently opened, is a great place to dine out on a budget, Meschés said. "Our prices start at \$12 and our most expensive is a \$26 Mediterranean sea bass."

Meschés has also tried to keep Zola a neighborhood restaurant, serving most entrees around \$14 and allowing patrons to spend more money only if they truly desire. "It's inexpensive comfort food," he said.

As far as great food to try on a budget, Meschés advised that pastas are great to try. "Especially with springtime coming, fresh vegetables out of the garden with olive oil and a little garlic make for a great meal," he said. "It's also a great time to try fun barbecue like flank steak marinade and maybe getting a fresh salad out of the garden."

Meschés said that D.C. is better off than most places in the country, as far as sales. "Potenza just opened two weeks ago and we've been packed every night," he said.

Meschés advised that there are a lot of options out there and people are



COURTESY OF OLIVA BOINET

Belga Café chef Bart Vandaele

very aware of the economy. "It's great to go out if you don't want a full meal and just getting appetizers and salads and splitting them," he said. "People eat lighter during the summertime anyway, so it's good to look for value that so many places are offering."

BART VANDAELE, CHEF, BELGA CAFÉ

Vandaele, who runs the Belgian restaurant Belga Café out of Capitol Hill, calls it one of his favorite neighborhoods. Although the café doesn't do special deals, it does offer tasting menus every few weeks and Zagat recently named it as the best deal for your buck.

"Our \$45 tasting menu is fairly cheap compared to other places," Vandaele said. "We create something unique that you will never see again."

Vandaele advises that pasta is great to try in a struggling economy. "Try to reinvent things as well by buying half-prepped dishes and adding your own flavors," he said. "Don't spend too much time, as time is of the essence as well, and a valuable thing a lot of people forget."

Vandaele feels that his restaurant, being in the neighborhood on Capitol Hill, has been spared from the economy. "One thing I learned from my dad is that you can't trick people," he said, talking about how he goes through prices for his restaurants.

Also, buying something like a chicken then cutting up the leftovers into a salad to take to work the next day is a great way to save money, Vandaele said. "Shop wisely and learn how to do multiple products with one dish."



Leeds



Meschés

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