

8SHORTGRASS.DOC

A recession tinge clouded Santa Fe on our visit. The shops and sidewalk aura lacked the dazzle and bustle tourist dough adds to an outpost.

The concert audiences appeared static for the chamber music performances. Graybeards and grannies as patrons pack a lot of coin to back active credit cards and thick checkbooks.

Ones seen leaving the parking garage across the street from the theater also appeared to be mounted on substantial rolling stock. My pal and I rode on the garage's elevator several times with ladies and gentlemen dressed in dark serges and groomed in rich fashions.

Together we spent 40 minutes on a morning press downtown. She bought a tablecloth to go on an oak table over at the Mertzson house from a French merchant skilled in hijacking tourists a lot craftier than ranch gals. The sashay through an art store netted a handmade necklace with time left over for the artist to locate how far Mertzson was from Laredo (300 miles). Strange, he had a friend on the Border who claimed Texas Rangers popped off unpapered aliens with Colt six-shooters to hear the splash into the Rio Grande. Lots of out of state folks seem to have friends in Texas who are specialists in border behavior.

On one errand, I shopped at Trader Vic's, a big player in discount goods from wine to groceries. Folks piled through the doors. Close as I could come to the triple-decker ham and cheeses meant a wait to reach over a lady short and stout enough to contest an old sister as big as lots of delicatessens.

An aisle over, peanut butter came within three and one half-feet of cart range. Wine specials blocked traffic to the Irish Oatmeal section. Ol' Vic sure showed how to out-trade the Irish once the aisle opened to reach the shelf. He priced oatmeal for half as much as the same box costs in Angelo.

One night after a concert, we ate under the cottonwoods at an old Santa Fe place. A news flash on the menu proclaimed "Make us an offer on the bottled wine!" Compared to the gamble on hollow horns down on Texas thin soils and weak grasses, a bid on a bottle of wine under a cottonwood grove in New Mexico sounded good. I had to stop juggling over 30 years ago. The pledge, however, doesn't prohibit a bet that some other hombre might still be thirsty after the bars closed and glad to pay more for a bottle.

When his highness, "Old Mac," or "Old Bill," returned for an order, I asked to bid on a few bottles in case the

market might rise at curfew time. He muttered, "No" and barely uttered, "reasonable offer refused." The moment stalled, my pal ordered her drink. Without a glance my way, he said, "Tap or bottled water?"

Once sight adjusted to candlelight, we saw right away that it would be better if the whole menu worked on a bid basis. The ruby trout cooked in clay, for example, held steady with last year's prices – maybe a tad stronger.

If fishhooks or rod tips cost more this season, the news missed Mertzon or Spring Creek. Also, the sign in front of the catfish parlor on Concho Street over in Angelo that advertised all the seafood you can eat for six dollars continued to back the same offer. However, the fact that catfish are rolled in cornmeal, not clay, might be the reason the market rose in Santa Fe. Too, it wouldn't be hard to imagine adobe bricks and adobe stucco might compete with mud fish liners. Down one block from the Guadalupe Inn, masons lay enough adobe bricks by noon alone to coat all the trout left in Northern New Mexico.

Next night, we ate in a place between downtown and the inn. The short menu offered Cornish game hen cooked under a brick, or that's the way the waiter translated *Sous la-Brique*. The good part is that a Cornish game hen comes out

very moist from a 10-minute session under a brick in a 500-degree oven.

Next morning on a walk, I met the chef on the way to work. The secret he revealed is that brining the bird beforehand made the meat cook even and moist. The hot brick added the speed his kitchen needed.

He had never cooked, or tasted, trout baked in clay. I offered to find out in return for his recipe on lamb rib chops he called "lamb lollipops." He declined. Good thing he didn't call my bluff. Closest thing I knew to mud cookery was a hot barbequed goat a cook dropped once at the old ranch in a hard rain.

We ate good food in several Santa Fe restaurants. We soon skipped making reservations and found a choice of tables. On one rainy-day lunch, we returned to give the clay potter fish outfit a second chance. A right crisp waitress brought out goat cheese tostados without mere mention of a bid on a jug of wine.