

MAY 30, 1985

Tomorrow the best restaurant to be in Mertzson in a long time is going to close. Normally the end of a hamburger stand or the expiration of a chili joint is not a time for great sadness in a community. The world of cold suet and broken toothpicks and greasy napkins finds few monuments erected honoring the passing of a griddle. However, I can't help believe that in this particular case the local citizens are bound to grieve over the loss of such a good cook.

An outstanding feature of the cafe was that it was unaffected by the oil boom. Oilfield towns are identified with bad food. In the big play farther west of Mertzson there's been enough reckless hash and desperate fried foods thrown together to upgrade, by comparison, mess hall and hospital cafeteria cuisine.

It takes stamina and finesse to survive in that environment. Out there you'd better learn fast to play the menu so you are not going against what's cooking on the grills during rush hours, or you'll be choking down a meatloaf flavored pork chop the likes of which Duncan Hines couldn't tell from hoe cake or filet of fried fish.

Unless you go with the majority, you're going to be eating wilted salads from bars that'd make the worst crop failure ever known look like a reproduction of the hanging gardens of Babylon. If you order toast during a big biscuit run or soup to be specially heated, the next 24 hours could be a most critical period for your digestive system.

Float with the crowd. Watch the truckers. When they take an antacid pill, you take two. They know the right antidote for the right kitchen. The reason I prescribe double doses for the casual traveler is the veteran will have a higher resistance to the toxins and indigestibles found on the blue plate.

Kids are good examples, too. Allowed to follow their natural inclinations, they won't eat anything that doesn't come from a cone or a cellophane wrapper. Unless their parents are teaching them a lesson by forefeeding them what's on the menu, siblings are hard to poison. The answer, by the way, to the age-old question "How you gonna tell if you like it if you won't taste it" is: "By smelling and seeing how bad it is."

Mertzson coffee drinkers claim that a new place will be open by the first of June. As wet as our climate has been the past few weeks, we may not need a restaurant. The grapevines behind my office look like they are going to make a big crop. By summer, who knows, we may be able to live off the fruits of the land.