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FOOD

On the Side

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PHOTO BY SCOT GORDON



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Excerpted from Central PA magazine, August 2005

When you walk into [MJ's Coffeehouse](#), the eatery attached to the [Allen Theatre](#) in Annville, the first thing you notice probably isn't the back wall with its black-and-white photos of movie stars. It's probably not the fact that a life-size figure of Spiderman is hiding in the ceiling rafters. And, although the idea is ingenious, it's probably not the fact that you can hear the movie that's playing in the theater over the speakers in the restrooms.

The first thing you'll probably notice when walking into the room is the smell of gourmet coffee, fresh panini sandwiches and assorted pastries, wafting all the way to the theater entrance. "Food enhances any mission that you have," says owner Skip Hicks. "It just adds another dimension to our business."

Whether they show movies or stage live plays, theaters have come a long way from the typical popcorn-and-soda snack. In fact, at the Allen as well as at several local dinner theaters, food takes a starring role in the entertainment experience.

When Skip and Martha Hicks originally planned to open their own movie theater, a small concession stand that included some specialty coffees was all that fit in the blueprints. Instead, those blueprints were rearranged, and MJ's was given much more room during the building process. Today, it functions either as a full-service concession stand or as a stand-alone coffeehouse.

"We were not only able then to include the specialty coffees, but because of the size of the space, we were able

[MJ's Coffeehouse & Allen Theatre](#)

[Memmi's Bakery](#)

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[Rainbow Dinner Theatre](#)

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to develop a full-fledged coffeehouse," he says. Customers are even allowed to take their sandwiches and desserts straight from the counter into the theater.

The variety of food at MJ's is endless: Pastries include cream puffs, rum balls, éclairs, pies and biscotti; sandwiches range from honey ham and melted brie on fresh basil bread to tuna salad on pumpernickel; and soups include a creamy tomato and fennel bisque. Typical coffeehouse drinks are available, such as the mochaccino crush (a cappuccino-and-chocolate blend), milkshakes, and strawberry, peach or raspberry smoothies.

While everything is made to order, few of the foods at MJ's are made in-house. However, the Hickses pride themselves on using local vendors close to their business to ensure freshness. For example, breads are made at [Memmi's Bakery](#) in Hershey; the [Dingeldein Bakery](#) in New Cumberland creates many of their decadent pastries; the East Indies Coffee and Tea Company in Lebanon supplies their coffee beans; and Hitz Farm Market in Manheim delivers down-home favorites such as shoofly pie and brownies.

Skip and Martha see their coffeehouse as both an independent business and as something that contributes greatly to the success of the Allen Theatre. For example, they have offered special additions to the menu to complement a film: For the showing of *Chocolat*, they offered candies similar to those in the film.

"Since we introduced sandwiches three or four years ago, our business has increased and we keep adding to our menu," says Skip. "We're always looking for something new."

And this kind of thinking always draws a crowd -- something John Spang of the [Dutch Apple Dinner Theatre](#) in Lancaster knows a lot about. "Most of our food is made from scratch," he says. "Peeling 100 pounds of potatoes per day has become commonplace for the kitchen employees."

Spang has been executive chef of the Dutch Apple for more than 10 years and has been in some form of food service for 33 years. While guests come to see shows including *Cats*, *Disney's Beauty and the Beast* and *Oklahoma!*, they also are attracted by Spang's award-winning carved braised top round with mushroom sauce, honey-baked chicken, meatballs marinara and baked ham with pineapple sauce.

"Dinner theater guests are looking for a quality production

with professional actors and a good meal -- something which you cannot get anywhere else," he says. The Dutch Apple also has a complete salad bar and dessert buffet included with the main meal.

Variety seems key in both coffeehouses and dinner theater buffets: The [Rainbow Dinner Theatre](#) in Paradise also features menus that include salmon with dill sauce, chicken saltimboca, stuffed shells and an array of vegetables.

While the Rainbow features a lineup of all-comedy shows, Pat Simpson takes her job as chef seriously. "I like working on somebody's dream," she says, referring to owners Cynthia and David DiSavino's 20-year commitment to their theater.

Three different entrees are always offered on the Rainbow's buffet: a beef, a fish and a chicken dish.

"It's a 'variety meal' to reach a variety of people," she says. "Even if the public comes back for the next show, they won't see the same things [on the menu]."

Desserts include an assortment of cakes, pies and ice cream, a "Rainbow salad" is in the works and the wine list boasts "wines from PA to New Zealand."

Both Spang and Simpson realize the huge responsibility they have to prepare foods that will be well-received by their audiences: "As I understand it, the whole experience is part of the show," says Simpson. "If the food doesn't taste right, it already puts [guests] in a bad mood, which makes them a little more critical of the show."

Lately, Simpson has experimented with different sauces to liven up the variety of meats she serves. Among her specialties are her ham sauce, made with brown sugar, honey and pineapples, which is cooked for a while in order to make the flavors even sweeter; a chicken, cheese and broccoli sauce; and a "hunter sauce," made with mushrooms, celery, brown gravy, diced tomatoes and red wine. "You want them to say they can't get it someplace else," says Simpson.

According to Spang, a dinner theater is the perfect place for an evening out. "Where else can you go and spend four or five hours out, see a professional-quality show and get as much as you want to eat for as little as \$38 per person?"

Quality, fresh food and good entertainment: It's really a perfect match. Says the Allen Theatre's Hicks: "Food

always enhances the experience."

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