

HINTS  
FROM  
HELOISE

## A beef with boiling

**Dear Heloise:** Regarding the hint from C.V. in St. Louis (Heloise here: C.V.'s hint in a previous column was to boil ground beef before using): By boiling the beef and draining it, the food value — soluble vitamins and minerals, especially B vitamins — is lost. Browning actually enhances the flavor of beef.

My hint: Drain the cooked beef into a bowl, refrigerate until the fat is solid and then separate the fat from the broth (which will be on the bottom) and add the broth back to the beef. This retains both food value and flavor. — Riva C., via email

Riva, thanks for reminding us (me included) of this tried-and-tested food hint. There may be a small loss of nutrients into the water, so it's a tossup! Eliminate the fat if you are watching your calorie intake, or expect some nutrient loss. Use the least amount of water that you can, and slow-cook rather than boil at high heat to keep the most vitamins. — Heloise

### No drippy mess

**Dear Heloise:** Our family loves to entertain and does so regularly. Here is one of my favorite entertaining hints: I keep several plastic squeeze bottles filled with condiments. Mustard, mayonnaise, ketchup and salsa can be kept neatly in these bottles. No worries about multiple knives and spoons in condiment jars contaminating them. — Mariah D. in New Jersey

### Good to the last drop

**Dear Heloise:** When the salad-dressing bottle appears empty, there is still a salad's worth of dressing in there. I add a couple of teaspoons of vinegar to the bottle, put the cap on and shake. I have more than enough dressing to finish my salad. — Emma D. in Oregon

Emma, I do this, too! This is an easy way to use the last of the salad dressing. Vinegar once again comes to the rescue! There are so many other uses and hints with vinegar that I wrote my Heloise's Fantabulous Vinegar Hints and More pamphlet, which you can order by sending \$5 and a long, self-addressed, stamped (70 cents) envelope to: Heloise/Vinegar, P.O. Box 795001, San Antonio, TX 78279-5001. My hint: I add some spices, such as chives and garlic powder, along with the vinegar to the dressing bottle. I call it "Surprise Salad Dressing." Be sure to label the bottle, or someone else will get a surprise when he or she pours it on a salad! — Heloise

### Bottle band

**Dear Heloise:** To prevent oil from running down the outside of the bottle when turning it upright after pouring, I take a tissue and fold it in half twice the long way. I wrap this around the neck of the bottle and secure with a short, fat rubber band. No greasy bottle slipping out of your hands and making a mess. — Carole in Nebraska

Good hint, Carole, a good hint indeed. One could use a paper towel or heavy paper napkin rather than a tissue. They are thicker and



John Bechtel/Special to MDN

At the Badlands Grill, the ambience is comfortable and relaxed, inviting guests to take their time and enjoy their meals.

## Badlands Restaurant and Grill: a case study

By JOHN BECHTEL

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This agreeable restaurant located at 1400 31st Ave. SW can be a little hard to find if you haven't already been a guest there.

If you are relatively new to town, it helps to know that in Minot, streets run north and south (the air force base to the north, Bismarck to the south); and the avenues run east and west. Main Street is the north/south axis (although I think it would make more sense for Broadway to serve this purpose — you could live in Minot for a year without ever knowing where Main Street is), and Central Avenue is the east-west axis. The restaurant is on the back side of the mall, near the main entrance to Sears. Badlands has a big sign and a huge parking lot, and it is handicapped accessible.

The atmosphere is casual, and its best feature in my opinion is the lovely fireplace halfway back to the kitchen. Overall, the restaurant has a cross-over appeal somewhere between rustic and bistro; lots of wood, saloon-style light fixtures, and to the left, just inside the front door, is this huge flat boulder with seating room for at least eight guests. Ask them how they got it in there.

There are at least four dining areas, each with a slightly different ambience. First impressions are favorable, but after that it almost seems as if you never left home, and it's no longer about the restaurant, but the conversation at the table. And that is as it should be. The food is casual to comfort food and the prices are mid-level for casual dining in the Minot area. Appetizers range from \$7.99 to \$8.99; salads \$9.99-\$12.99; steaks \$13.99 (six oz. sirloin) to \$29.99 (20 oz. ribeye); seafood \$13.99 (two shrimp entrees) to \$18.99 (two salmon dishes, one white fish plate, walleye and blackened tilapia). Pasta dishes range from \$11.99 to \$13.99. There's even a menu page for comfort foods, with things like meat loaf, pot roast and pork chops. Oh, and there's a kid's menu for \$4.99.

If you like wine with your meal, the best bargain on the menu is every bottle is half price on Monday nights, and the selection of



A warm fireplace provides a relaxing, enjoyable setting for a meal.

John Bechtel/Special to MDN

wines is modestly priced to begin with. For example, you can purchase any Stone Cellar brand for \$8.50 for a bottle on Mondays. Not bad. A Long Island Iced Tea will only set you back \$6.99 (four shots).

A few other details you may want to know: There is a separate room for private parties with a seating capacity for up to 40. There is no charge for the room as long as you are eating there. Allen Lovro, the general manager, suggests you reserve the room at least a day ahead of time to be on the safe side; it is first-come, first-served. Allen also recommends reservations for any group of 15 or more, whether you need the room or not. The Badlands has wi-fi. There will be a special Lent menu.

### Staffing

Allen, the restaurant manager, says they usually don't place employment want ads in the paper to get help. They recruit from referrals from other employees with a good track record, and they sometimes hire walk-ins. Shoe-leather initiative can say a lot about a person. On those occasions when I have been a guest at Badlands, everyone appeared busy and focused on their tasks.

Allen is married, a father to a boy and girl, and owns a local ranch. He graduated from Bismarck State College with a degree in hotel and restaurant management. About a decade ago, what we know as Badlands was a different restaurant with the unlikely name Up the Creek Fish Camp and Grill, a franchise operation out of Atlanta. Allen opened that restaurant, which didn't survive, he then left to manage Tower Travel Center, a truck stop halfway between Jamestown and Fargo for four years, and came back to re-open this restaurant under a new name, Badlands, and new ownership. But more about that in a minute.

Allen, who is 40 years old, says the two differences he notices with the newer generation of employees are that for most of them cell phones are a major distraction that didn't exist before; and when you ask them to perform a task, they ask why? His generation just got it done. The "why" was about keeping your job.

### Abe Sakak, restaurateur

Occasionally in doing these restaurant and food reviews, the narrative requires the use of terms unique to the hospitality

industry. For example, you may have noticed our ongoing use of the word "guest," because that is what the hospitality industry (hotels and restaurants) is really all about. For example, when a guest "renews" (restaurant-ese for "comes back"), studies have shown that 68 to 70 percent of them do so because of a favorable experience they have had with just one employee of the establishment, whether it be the host(ess), the server, bar tender or other staffer. It is not enough to have a great menu and a good cook. That's just where it all starts.

A restaurateur is more than a restaurant owner; it applies to a professional manager/owner of multiple enterprises and skilled application of systems technology in their operations. This can be a crucial distinction. It is not that a more intuitive and independent management style cannot succeed, but that a systems approach is less likely to fail.

### The guest experience

Take Abe Sakak, the owner of Badlands, for example. Abe left Tehran, the capital city of Iran, in 1975, when he was 15 years old. The monarchy of Shah Reza Pahlavi was starting to unravel, Abe's father had just died, so his mother and older brothers sent him to live in Fergus Falls, Minn. Abe wasn't to see his mother again for another 20 years. He took business management classes

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## □ Grill

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because he wasn't paying attention. A guest we were not. Friends we were not. For our server we were clearly a nuisance and an intrusion.

I also thought about those occasions when someone complained about cold or uncooked food, or took some unsatisfactory product back to a customer service counter, only to be received as if they were either a liar or a thief, or having a server challenge them with, if you didn't like the food, why did you eat so much of it? Many years ago I ate a meal in a Pennsylvania Holiday Inn and my meal required an obligatory side of red beets, and to make matters worse, the red beets were so old and rubbery that it was very difficult to get a fork into them. I didn't eat the red beets, but everything around them. I complained about it when it was time to pay. The cashier challenged me if they were so bad, why did I wait so long to complain? Why didn't I tell my server? My answer was that I wasn't looking for a free meal or compensation, but I thought they would want to know about their rubber red beets. After the cashier's sarcasm, however, I went back into the dining room while they were still clearing our table. I found my red beets, grabbed a fork and headed back to the cashier, suggesting she try to get a fork into one of them. She gamely tried and the red beet flew off the side of the plate and landed on the floor. Then I did get a full refund, for all four of us at the table. Again, was this a guest experience? Not hardly. We've all been there.

Somewhere along the line, Abe Sakak became a true restaurateur. He became a pro. I asked him with so many restaurant locations (12 in North Dakota alone!) how could he manage consistency, quality and things like brand recognition? Which means, how do you maintain your distinction between you and all your competitors? Particularly in a place like Minot, which is pretty far from everywhere and there are only two restaurant food distributors in town, and almost all of the restaurants are buying their raw materials (meats, baked goods, produce) from the same people?

### Supply chain management



John Bechtel/Special to MDN

With a menu ranging from salads and hamburgers to seafood and steak, the Badlands Grill has something to please almost any guest. Cook **Mitchell Conrad** cooks up steaks.

Have you ever wondered why it is almost impossible to find fresh (never frozen) seafood here in Minot? Actually you can get it, but probably not at a price you are willing to pay. It is all about the cost of getting it here, and distance is money. Local grocers have probably experimented with flying fresh fish in periodically, but it is risky business, because flying it in fresh can easily add \$7 to \$9 to a plate of food in a restaurant, and if it doesn't sell quickly in the grocery store, it gets discounted with each day that passes. Business people like to stay in business, and profit is the cost of doing business tomorrow. Right here in Minot we continually see restaurants go extinct, and it is usually for the same reason: Their costs exceeded their revenue, and that is not sustainable. Now if Microsoft or Cisco or some other Silicon Valley giant decided to relocate to Minot and brought with them 500 southern California employees and their families, all of whom are addicted to their diets of fresh seafood, we might see a successful seafood restaurant here, serving fish at dinner tonight that was caught this morning.

The demand might be sufficient to make it economical to ship it here in quantity and daily. We, as the restaurant guests, exert a huge influence on what they offer. They are going to sell what we are willing to buy.

Abe explained that much of the lettuce used in North Dakota comes

from Yuma, AZ. That's 1,700 miles your lettuce has to travel from farm to distributor, store or restaurant. That's over 24 hours of non-stop driving. And none of us want wilted lettuce. Many other perishables come into Minot from Lincoln, Neb., about 800 miles away. Many large chains and franchises develop their own proprietary supply chains to control cost and quality.

Now you might think the oil boom made things better, because of all the people moving into the area. More demand for restaurants, more variety, greater choices and with increased demand, maybe even some food prices will go down. Well, not so fast. Yes, there is more demand, which puts more pressure on the distributors, who bring the raw products (meats and produce) into town. But that means they need more trucks, more drivers and maybe even higher wages for the drivers. Yes, they can invest capital, either their own or the banks to purchase more trucks, but what happens if/when demand falters, such as when the price of oil drops dramatically on world markets and they end up with too much, and now, unneeded equipment?

So when restaurant owners perceive an interest in new menu items, they have to guesstimate the demand, and then sit down with their supply chain providers and discuss the logistics of getting the raw materials into town, an hour south of Canada, before they know

if it is feasible. As you can see, it will probably be a while before oysters on the half shell will be readily available here in Minot. Geography has a big influence on what we eat, anywhere in the world.

### Franchising a restaurant vs. an independent

Abe says you have to work twice as hard as an independent. He says franchisees meet regularly from many different parts of the country and world and compare experiences, which is extremely valuable. They get more global input as to what their industry is doing, and there is terrific cross-pollination of ideas. This is where their creativity comes in. As a franchise, no one operator can implement new ideas until the chain implements changes for the entire brand and helps everyone in the system to grow. Imagine what would happen, for example, if every McDonald's had a different idea what color the famous arches should be?

I asked Abe how you can control quality in 30 restaurants from a home office and small staff in Minot? He emphasized five things: Get the right people on the bus. Selecting your key personnel is like getting married. If you get a good one, there's nothing like it. If you get a bad one, there's nothing like that either. Secondly, your talent has to fly your flag; they have to adhere

relentlessly to your belief system. Third, if you want loyalty from your staff, you have to make emotional deposits if you want to make withdrawals. Fourth, everything gets measured. With today's technology, Abe said, tongue in cheek, he can know, per guest, per month, how many times they flush the toilet in the restrooms. Or how many extra French fries were used last week, per order, above the norm? I asked him if he ever felt overwhelmed with too much information? Or did his employees feel that way? Abe asked me How do you feed an elephant? One bite at a time. Take one goal at a time and keep a scorecard. The fifth essential is maintaining accountability for results at all times.

When Abe invested in the first incarnation of Badlands, Up the Creek Fish Camp and Grill, the franchisor, who had seven or eight stores, folded. Other things changed, too. He and his long-term partner Myron Thompson, decided to go in separate directions. Abe took all the non-Applebee stores, including some Village Inns (mostly breakfasts and pies). Abe began investing in Sonics stores, including the one here in Minot and another in Fargo. Because of the climate, he designed his stores to include a dining room.

As an independent restaurant, Abe, Allen and others have to work harder to find new and better ways to improve the guest experience. There is an unspoken synergy among them; Abe needs them to buy in totally to the vision, and they need his guidance in getting there one step at a time. Abe quoted Stephen Covey: "To achieve goals you've never achieved before, start doing things you've never done before." Then Abe gave me a homework assignment. Go to YouTube and enter "Covey 4 Disciplines of Execution." I did my homework. I laughed myself silly, and I learned. Now I pass that homework assignment on to you.

As my guest, and the guest of The Minot Daily News, please feel free to comment on these articles. Your feedback helps me better serve you. Besides informing you about places to eat or visit that you may or may not already frequent, I try to help you get better acquainted with our neighbors and service providers, and provide little tidbits of new information and fun facts. Any hole-in-the-wall fun places to try out please let me know about them. Minot first, then anywhere in North Dakota and just across the border in neighboring states. I answer all emails. My email



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