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O.T. Hodge Chile Parlor is still hot stuff

By DRU THOMAS
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THE SCOOP

Although it may be at odds with your New Year's resolutions about diet, O.T. Hodge Chile Parlor is a soothing balm to the sore post-Christmas pocketbook. Here in the heart of downtown Clayton is real diner atmosphere, replete with a streamlined chrome counter, a handful of waitresses and short-order cooks who can sling diner lingo with the best of them, and prices so affordable you'll feel like you've taken a trip in a time machine.

O.T. Hodge Chile Parlor has proved its staying power. Since opening in 1904, the chili parlor has served generations of St. Louisans. Today John Eirten owns and operates three of the five stores in the small local chain, including the Clayton location.

THE SCENE

Clayton's little storefront diner is small and bright, with red seating and tiles accenting the mostly white space. The sounds are a world apart from the fashionable Clayton establishments nearby. The rushing gurgle of fries submerging in hot oil alternates with the hiss of patties on the grill. The clink and clank of dishes syncopate the rhythms. And the staccato calls of "Tamale in" (tamale smothered in chili) and "Put legs on it" (make it a carry-out item) punctuate the short-order symphony.

THE SPREAD

The diner starts its day at 5:30 a.m., offering a traditional breakfast menu of eggs, ham, sausage, biscuits and gravy, etc. Although chili makes a bow at breakfast with an "eggs in the sauce" option, it plays a starring role at lunch. The diner serves chili con carne, a meaty, bean-free version that's smooth and medium thick. A relatively mild chili powder flavor dominates in this old-fashioned chili, and it's also a touch greasy. You can kick up the heat with Louisiana Pure Crystal hot sauce, available at your table. You can also order the chili with beans, although they tend to be a bit mushy.

While lots of bowls of chili are served, most patrons order their chili atop some other food. The most popular choice is the chili mac (\$2.85), a platter of spaghetti smothered in chili, but chili-topped tamales, burgers, hot dogs, eggs, nachos and fries are also alternatives. Chili-free sandwiches are available for the faint-hearted. Our chili-fest featured the tamale in (\$2.85) and the slinger (at \$5.35, the most expensive item on the lunch menu). The slinger is legend and too daunting to finish for any but the most audacious. This platter comes complete with two cheeseburgers (sans bun), American fries and an egg, all smothered with copious amounts of chili. Before indulging I tried to coax my panicked vascular system into a zen-like state.

The chili flavor dominated the tamale, although the effect wasn't unpleasant. The slinger provided more flavor separation. The burgers were pretty thin, the American fries were a little



greasy, but the scrambled egg with its chili blanket brought back my fondest memories of post-revelry visits to O.T. Hodge many years ago. (Back then we were made of sterner stuff.) We also found the white toast an oddly satisfying counterpart to our chili-laden entrees, and we enjoyed the perfect pairing of chili with an icy mug of root beer (\$1.35). In much the same way as White Castle burgers, O.T. Hodge's chili dishes exist outside the usual universe of diet and nutritional concerns. They are unique treats and guilty pleasures that satisfy a very specific hankering. Sure, you'd be unlikely to enter the chili in a cook-off with the doyens of Southwest cuisine, but St. Louisans have been downing these chili-smothered meals with gusto for nearly 100 years.

THE SCORE

The food is cheap at O.T. Hodge Chile Parlor, with most lunch items priced between \$1.45 and \$4.35. It's also filling and guaranteed to warm you on a cold afternoon. The diner is also one of the few Clayton locations where you can get an inexpensive, traditional breakfast.

O.T. Hodge Chile Parlor

Address: 6 South Central

Phone: 314-721-8880

Hours: 5:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday

Credit Cards: None; cash only

Wheelchair Access: Yes

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