

# Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

## Columnist's Unending Search for Summer Restaurant Specials

Okay, I'll admit it. Pat and I like to eat out on occasion – like once a week.

Times are tough out there in restaurant-land in this difficult economic period. More and more eateries like Bistro Philippe, City Grill, OK Corral, Red Sky, Ristorante Italia, Soleil, Terra Cotta, and Vin Tabla have closed. New restaurants like Luna Bella, Pizzeria Vivace, Skybox Restaurant & Sports Bar, Sur Real, and Zinburger are fighting hard to gain a foothold.

Many restaurants are offering summer deals to attract us into their establishments. There are groups of restaurants that offer a discount if you join their “club.” Other restaurants issue discount coupons, or offer recession busters, summer samplers, and so on. Some aggressive eateries do both. Here are some facts and a lot of opinions about these opportunities.

For \$15 you could have (sorry; sold out until next year) joined the **Tucson Newspapers Dining Club** that gives you a free entrée with the purchase of another entrée of equal or greater value at each of 26 restaurants – through October 31<sup>st</sup>. Participating restaurants in our area include Armitage Wine Lounge & Café, El Charro Cafe, Desert Garden Bistro, Flying V Bar & Grill, Janos, Mc Mahon's Prime Steakhouse, Montana Avenue, Shlomo & Vito's Delicatessen, and Sur Real.

**Tucson Originals** is an organization of local, independently operated restaurants that in this summer of 2009 (through Labor Day) offers specials for \$20.09. The specials are different at each of almost 40 participating restaurants, and range from wine tastings to appetizers, salads, lunches, dinner entrees, complete dinners, or dessert samplers. Tucson Originals also sponsors culinary cruises with their own chefs and cooking classes in member restaurants. Restaurant choices within easy reach of *Foothills Star* readers include Acacia, Chad's Steakhouse & Saloon, Eclectic Café and Pizza, El Charro Cafe, Janos, J-Bar, Jonathan's Cork, Papagayo, Pastiche Modern Eatery, Ric's Café, and Taco Bron.

Every three months, you can order (online) gift certificates to selected Tucson Originals restaurants for 25-40% off. These are really good deals; Pat and I have done this a few times, but quantities are limited and they sell out fast.

**Fox Restaurant Concepts** is a collection of boutique restaurants in Arizona, Colorado, Texas, and Kansas. All six of the member restaurants in Tucson are located in our neighborhood and include Blanco, Montana Avenue, North, Sauce, Wildflower, and Zinburger. Fox Restaurants Concepts' “Summer Experience Sessions,” lasting through August 31<sup>st</sup>, include various summer samplers, wine discounts, and cooking classes.

So, with all this to consider, what's a hungry, dollar-conscious couple to do? What we do is search out individual promotions for our favorite restaurants. We go to their websites, we sign up to receive promotional e-mails, we flip through the Valpak discount coupons mailed to our



*El Charro Café's "Cinco de Summer!" menu offers a choice of five meals for \$5 each.  
(Photo by Bob Ring)*

house each month, and we clip ads from the newspapers and magazines we read each week.

Just to keep this column manageable, let me share our favorite restaurants from the three groups of restaurants that we've been talking about. We have other favorites too – some offer summer discounts, some don't – but that's another story.

**Chad's Steakhouse & Saloon** has been a Ring-family favorite for years - very casual and very good food with large portions. Pat and I often split a steak; Chad's is the only restaurant I've ever been to that provides a free side dish (like a baked potato) for the split portion - to match the primary order. And, there's no fee for splitting a meal.

**El Charro Café** Mexican food restaurant in Ventana Village has the best meal deal I've ever seen. They have a \$5 summer menu with a choice of five complete meals. Happy hour from 3-6:00 pm every weekday features many half-price drinks. Moreover, El Charro Cafe can keep track of your total expenditures in the restaurant over several meals; when you reach \$100 you get \$10 off the next bill. Under the right set of circumstances, two people can eat and drink a very good meal for practically nothing – Pat and I have done it.

**J-Bar** - featuring the flavors of Southern Arizona, Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean - has a recession-buster menu and a summer passport program where every time you order something off their summer sampler menu for \$12.95 (three choices that change several times over the summer), you get a special passport stamped. Four stamps over time (carries over from summer to summer) on an individual passport gets you a free summer sampler meal.

J-Bar also has a great house margarita, well drinks, and draft beer at half-price during their 5-6:30 pm happy hour and a killer hot dog and fries appetizer for only \$2.75 that I've seen many customers order as a light meal. The hot dogs notwithstanding, we think J-Bar is a classy place and where else will you find Janos Wilder stopping by your table to say hello and share his plans for a downtown restaurant?

**Jonathan's Cork**, featuring meat and fish with a Southwestern flair, is our choice for variety and a really nice meal. On one special occasion I had buffalo steak and Pat had ostrich! Owner and chef Jonathan Landeen, often stops by our table to say hello, along with his wife Colette, who is a weaving and knitting buddy of Pat's. Jonathan and Colette will be leading a culinary cruise to the Caribbean in November.

We discovered **Pastiche Modern Eatery** last fall when Pat was looking for a restaurant to host a dinner for special friends and fellow knitters. Between Pat's entertaining her knitting friends and our scouting and follow-up dinners, we've had quite a few meals at Pastiche in the last year. Besides the very good food – American cuisine with world influence, we particularly like the bistro-size portions that are available and the low-priced wine specials from their on-site wine shop.

Pat and I take seriously the responsibility of being your summer dinner deal agents. It's "heavy" work, but someone's got to ... It is truly amazing that we don't each weigh two tons.