

Poetry Hour at the Regional House of Pancakes

by Con Chapman

San Francisco restaurant Atelier Crenn refers to its dishes as "poetic culinaria" and its menu is written as a poem.

The Wall Street Journal



"I dunno--could be a blank verse sestina filet with artisanal trochees."

I have come then, at the end of a long drive, a day's journey, to my little home town in central Missouri, which I sometimes refer to as "The Land That Franchises Forgot." We had a Holiday Inn, a Jerry Lewis cinema and various hamburger chain outlets that lost their trademark-bearing status for failure, refusal or inability to pay their franchise fees. Now, nothing but their former premises remain; vaguely familiar but less attractive than before, like the painting in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which grew old as its subject stayed young.



Former Jerry Lewis cinema.

Once they were modern local avatars of larger cultural phenomena we would see in televised advertisements. Happy people eating hamburgers, splashing in a hotel pool, eating pizza on TV--we can be happy too, without driving hundreds of miles away!

We had met the challenge of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*--that reflected images in works of art tend to depreciate the value of the humble world around us--and prevailed! Or so we thought.



"This can't possibly seat more than 200 cockroaches!"

Thus it was that our International House of Pancakes became just a Regional House of Pancakes. Ed Keyde, the owner, figured out he could have a nicer Local House of Habitat for himself and his family

if he just stopped paying the 4% of gross sales advertising fee and the 4% of gross sales franchise fee--and so he did.

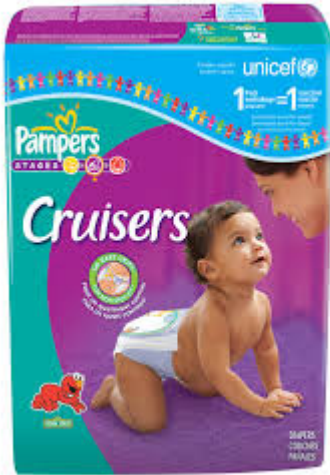
Nasty letters flew back and forth from lawyer to lawyer, but the parties eventually parted amicably; IHOP would write-off the unpaid fees, and Ed would stop using "IHOP," "International House of Pancakes" or any similar derivative form of either mark. He couldn't call his place "National House of Pancakes," so he decided on "Regional House of Pancakes," or "R-HOP" as it came to be known by late-night, early-morning and mid-day breakfast *aficionados*.

"A terrible beauty is born." W.B. Yeats

Ed decided that if his little place was going to stand out in the crowded fast-food market that spiraled outwards from the intersection of State Highways 50 and 65 he had to do something special, so he hired my old poetic competitor, Hazel Flange, to elevate the tone of the menu with her tin-ear poetry. God, I said to myself, now whenever I want to tuck into a stack of blueberry wheatcakes I'll have to first peruse that dowager's doggerel.

I pull into the parking lot with my friend Fred, who I check on whenever I'm back in town to see what number wife he's on. "The

third," he had said as he tossed an Extra-Humongo package of Pampers in my back seat. "This is alimony for number two."



We're greeted by the hostess, whom Fred recognizes as Miss Congeniality from this year's Sorghum and Soybean Festival. "Hey Cheryl," he says with a smile.

"Don't get any ideas," she says as she leads us to our table.

At a pancake house your placemat is your menu, so we look down at the table to review the bill of fare.

"Oh God," I groan.

"What?" Fred asks.

"*While you were asleep we were makin'/Ham and sausage and also bacon.*"

"Cute," Fred says.

"*Cute?*"



"In your dreams, Freddy-boy."

"Yeah, funny. Somethin' to brighten your day."

"It's *terrible*!"

"Mr. Wannabe-Poet," Jim says, shaking his head. "Always got an aesthetic hair across his ass."

Jim's like that; down-to-earth, he keeps me grounded. One time he asked me what my hourly rate was as a big-city lawyer back East, and when I told him \$500 he said "There's nobody in Boston worth that kind of money with their clothes on."

The waitress appears and again Fred gives her a big smile and the up-down-and-sideways once over. It's no wonder he's had so many women in his life while I've . . . uh . . . read a lot of books.

"Hello beautiful," he says and she smiles. "What's the soup?"

"The soup du jour of the day is Italian wedding."

"Was it made at a real Italian wedding?" Fred asks.

"I'm ready to order if you're not," I say impatiently.



Crabby Appleton

"Go ahead Crabby Appleton," Jim snorts, recalling the grumpy character from the Tom Terrific cartoon series.

"I'll have the Pigs-in-a-Blank . . ." I begin, but the waitress cuts me off.

"You have to order by the full name," she says. "We got these special pads, see?" she says as she shows me a green piece of paper with white boxes next to menu items.

I try not to have pet peeves--like children, I love them all--but this is one aspect of dining in America that really frosts my ass; some genius comes up with a stupid name--a "Fish-a-ma-jig" or a "Frozen Fribble Treat"--and if you actually want one you have to make a fool of yourself in front of a restaurant filled with strangers.



North Korean Pigs-in-a-Blanket parade before reviewing stand, May Day 2012.

"But the descriptions include these awful poems," I say, hoping to be let off the hook.

"Sorry, I just work here," the waitress says without, I note, a great deal of remorse.

I gulp and exhale so forcefully that Fred's flip-up bangs, which he first perfected as a drummer in our high school rock band four decades ago, flutter in the breeze. I gulp in trepidation, as if I'm twelve-years old on the high dive at the municipal pool again, and plunge ahead:

"A hunger so big that you can spank it? Why don't you try our pigs-in-a-blanket?"

"Okay," the waitress says as she checks the box. "Anything to drink?"



Swinging teen dance, circa 1966.

"Your body takes so much abuse/Give it a break with fresh-squozed orange juice."

"Is 'squozed' even a word?" Jim asks.

"I'm gratified that you're finally taking an interest in the mayhem that your local poetess laureate is inflicting on the English language."

"You didn't answer my question."

I hesitate for a moment, as I'm caught in a compromised position. I'm pro-descriptive/anti-prescriptive when it comes to language, so I have to 'fess up.



Loretta Swit: She yoozed it in a movie.

"I once heard Loretta Swit use it in a made-for-TV movie," I confess.

"So it's okay?" the waitress asks, a hopeful tone in her voice. "Cause I think you can learn a lot watching TV."

"You can go right ahead and squeeze me," Fred says with a leer.

"Any coffee?" the waitress asks me, ignoring him.

What I really want is a mocha, a latte, a cappucino, something to remind me of the civilization I've left behind.

"Do you have espresso drinks?" I ask.

"On the back of the placemat," the waitress says, and there I find more damned couplets, the product of Hazel's dim little imagination.

"Of course you know that we have got a/iced vanilla mocha latte."

"Got it," the waitress says before turning to Fred. "And for you?"



He gets a puckish grin on his face, which I've seen before. The last time was when a visiting symphony orchestra came to our school to perform *The William Tell Overture*, and when they got to the part that was used as the theme for *The Lone Ranger*, Fred yelled out "Hi-yo, Silver!"

"First I have a question for you," Fred says.

"Shoot," the waitress says.

"Bang!" Fred replies.

"Can we please get on with this?" I ask, exasperated.

"Sure, sure," Fred says as he looks down at his placemat and begins:



*Say what's the deal with the parsley garnish?
I've eaten that stuff and it tastes like varnish.*

