

Offbeat diners offer quality, value

Mar-Shel Cafe

Everything from low prices to friendly service give the Mar-Shel Cafe, 125 S. 27th St., the look and taste of a Nebraska small-town cafe.

Bill and Leola Duffy, who bought the cafe nearly five years ago, open their small, but cozy, cafe every weekday morning at 5 and close at 2 p.m.

Since this would be one of my first dining experiences at a restaurant in Lincoln that didn't require customers to pay for their food before eating it, I was a little nervous about what to expect.

But any fears I had quickly disappeared when I stepped into the cafe and was reminded of the atmosphere of a favorite cafe I used to frequent in my hometown of West Point.

As soon as I sat down at the counter, Leola greeted me and a friend, who volunteered to accompany me on this 6 a.m. experience.

Despite the hour, Leola was smiling when she handed us our menus.

After looking at the menu, I thought for sure I must have been back home because almost every breakfast item was under \$4.

Mar-Shel's offers a good variety of breakfast meals, ranging from steak and eggs to cold cereal. I chose my favorite breakfast entree, coffee and a Western omelet. My friend settled for hot tea, French toast and an egg.

While we waited for our food to arrive, Leola brought us the morning paper. My friend read the comics and I looked around and noticed only one other customer. Again, I began to wonder what I might have gotten myself into.

About 10 minutes later, Leola returned with our food. I knew after I took the first bite of my omelet that the reason more customers weren't there was because of the time, not the food.

My omelet was better than any I have ever made, even though it didn't have mushrooms. Unlike my omelets, there weren't any black spots, and it came in one piece. It contained diced ham, plenty of cheese and just enough onion to give it bite.

The Western omelet is served with a generous portion of crispy hash browns, jelly and four slices of toast. The toast was perfect, not overly brown and lightly buttered.

My friend said her meal was "above average." The French toast was crispy outside, while still retaining its soft homemade-bread texture on the inside. Her egg, which she ordered over-easy, was not greasy with a soft yolk.

After we finished our meal, Leola refilled my coffee cup for the third time. By now, the cafe was beginning to fill with construction workers, garbage collectors and other blue-collar laborers.

Had a few farmers been present, I might have thought I was back in West Point.



-- Jerry Guenther

Dixon's Cafe

Located on the less-gentrified frontiers of the Haymarket, Dixon's Cafe, 707 L St., has been serving Lincoln's blue-collar crowd since 1972.

It's a cozy place that makes good use of the small interior, with booths close enough together to hear every

conversation going.

And boy do these folks talk. Machines, fishing and bitching about the boss seem to be the order of the day. These topics are covered with all the fervor of two professors going over the fine points of one theory or another.

Things really get interesting when the conversations get confused as

one listens, stringing together a few phrases from each of the surrounding tables.

The waitresses here are amazing, descending as soon as one enters and bringing food literally hot off the grill. While doing this, they manage to follow every conversation in the place and trade jibes with the familiar customers.

The breakfast menu is pretty heavy on the standard eggs, toast and meat permutations. I opted for a stack of pancakes.

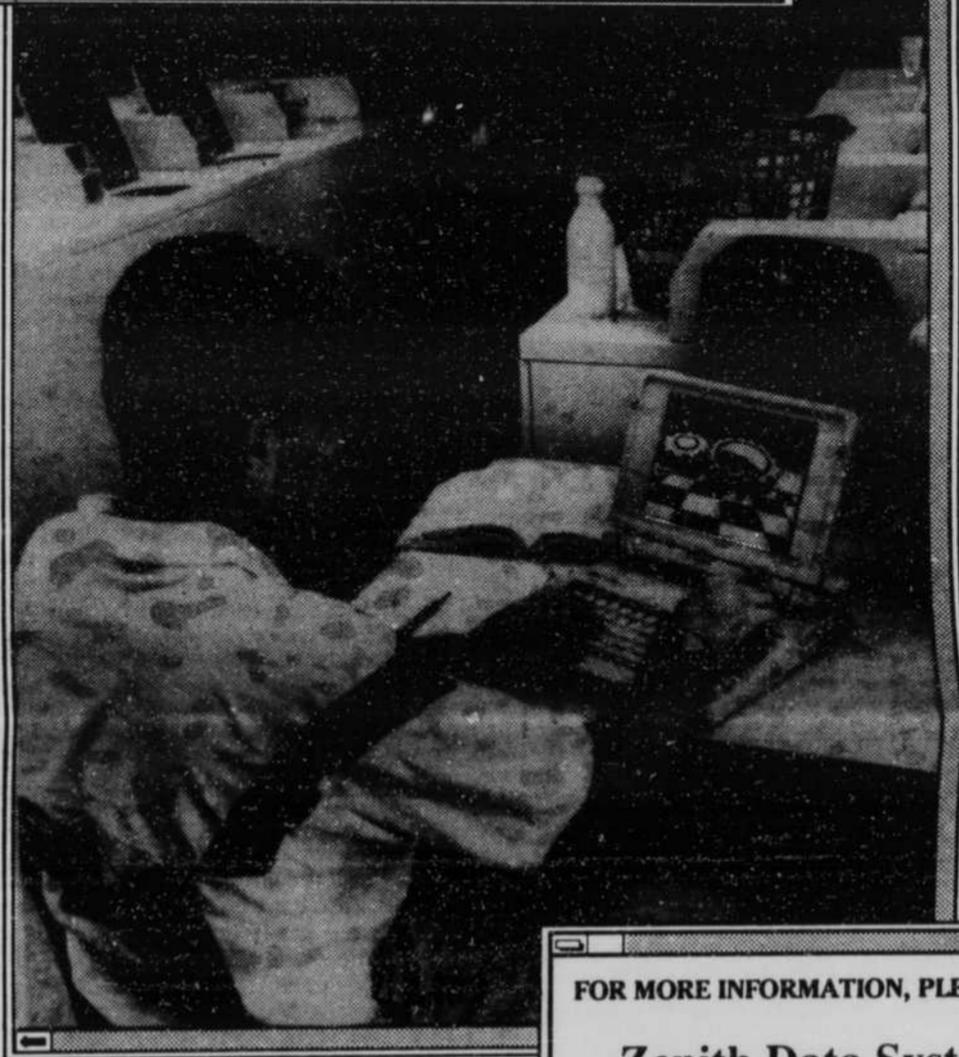
"I need a stack," the waitress yelled back.

"A stack of what?"

"A stack of pancakes."

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