

# Country Drive-In serves tasty food, summer memories

BY CAROLINE LEE

For The Sunday Gazette

HALFMOON — Ah, summertime, when we think less about white tablecloths than picnic tables. The winter holidays are full of tradition, the summer ones of pure joy. My cherished memories are of long afternoons spent reading library books in the hammock, the smell of chlorine mixed with slightly burnt ballpark franks in the air, and fireflies and sparklers on warm starry nights.

While I was stopping for ice cream with friends on Long Island, Capital Region folks were doing the same at any number of seasonal joints whose opening signals the end of the school year.

The Country Drive-In on Vischer Ferry Road in Halfmoon is one of those places. You can't miss it because it has the biggest table umbrellas my mother has ever seen. The cinderblock building has a fresh coat of white paint, and the red, white, and blue picnic tables coordinate with the umbrellas.

## \$29 and Under

The place was as neat as a pin on the warm night that we went. We walked over freshly raked gravel to stand under the roof and read the menu out of the sun. They've got paper menus inside but it's more fun to look up at the painted menu boards and people-watch.

The condiments are arranged neatly on the counter, with tiny paper cups nearby for filling. Salt and pepper shakers, napkin and straw dispensers are there as well, everything clean and tidy.

You order your food and pay at the window all the way on the left, where the cashier will give you your number (we were No. 49) and send you over to stand in front of the next window to wait. "Someone will yell your number," we were told, and sure enough, about five minutes later, someone did.

### SATISFYING CHOICES

Mom had her heart set on a burger and ordered a half-pounder

with lettuce and tomato (\$5.05). I was pleased to see a grilled chicken salad (\$6.95) on the menu, because my intermittent, guilt-filled efforts to lose weight for the summer are well under way. It was a delicious salad.

We got small orders of onion rings (\$2.95) and french fries (\$2.25), for research purposes. They were generous servings, the contents piled high above the sides of their paper containers, and they were very good. We liked their thin fries, more substantial than fast-food shoestring ones, and Mom said: "These are good even without salt."

The onion rings are the kind with crumbly batter that falls off in big tasty pieces, and the edges of some of the onions are browned. Some of the thick onion slices get cooked until just mushy and sweet; those are the good ones.

The picnic tables are on either side of the parking area in front. Mom chose a shady table near a garbage can, which was patrolled by both an iridescent black bird

## Country Drive-In

**WHERE:** 1455 Vischer Ferry Road, Halfmoon. Phone 371-3455.

**WHEN:** Open seven days; summer hours are 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

**HOW MUCH:** \$26.10

**MORE INFO:** Cash or personal checks only. No credit cards. Restrooms not fully wheelchair-accessible

that fixed on us with his beady yellow eyes and a spray-bottle wielding young man who cleared tables diligently, neither of whom encroached upon our peaceful repast.

The salad looked terrific in its clear clamshell container, which was slightly warm where the chicken was, and cold where the salad was. Here is a list of the different vegetables I found, in addition to the iceberg lettuce, all of them neatly trimmed: shredded carrot, yellow and orange; thinly sliced cucumber; red onion; green pepper strips; translucent slices of radish; radicchio; a somewhat ripe red tomato; and celery. There was even a bag of fresh chunky croutons. The chicken, which gave my

plastic cutlery no trouble whatsoever, had just a little smoky flavor to it from the spiedie marinade. For an inexpensive place, it was a great salad; for an ice-cream stand, it was excellent.

Mom's burger was cooked a bit more than medium-rare, as she had requested, but it was still a great burger. "Hey, where did those pickles go?" I asked her, remembering the slices speared with a toothpick into the top of the bun. She turned her sandwich around to show me. Oh. They were on the burger, and they were good.

### TIME FOR ICE CREAM

Following the example set by our neighbors, we left our stuff at the table while we went to get our

ice-cream. You order and pay for dessert at the window on the right, and when your ice-cream is ready, another window next to it slides open and a teenage arm sticks out, holding your cone. At least that's what happened to us.

We both got vanilla cones; Mom got a small (\$1.90), and I got a kid's size (\$1.65), with colored sprinkles for 40 cents more. It wasn't the best soft ice cream I ever had, but it was a hot night, we were in a friendly place with people around us laughing and enjoying themselves, and we were topping off a nice al fresco meal with a melty ice cream cone, so it was good enough. And that was pretty darn good.

The Country Drive-In is still making happy memories, like for the little girl we saw wearing a paper crown and flip-flops who grinned as she pushed up her sunglasses and reached out for her ice-cream cone at the pick-up window. It's a happy place, and the food is good. Summer is too short, so and soon.