

ACCENT

ON FOOD

Jonathan Byrd's still champ when it comes to cafeterias

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 2, 2000

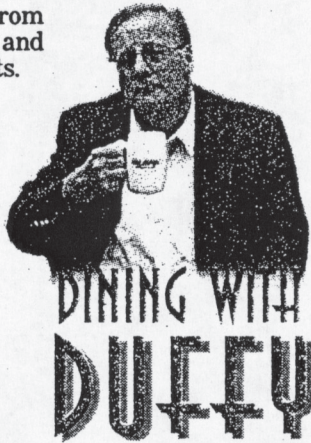
Jonathan Byrd opened his massive cafeteria just off the Greenwood exit of Interstate 65 and Main Street in 1988, at a time cafeterias appeared to be achieving dinosaur status, with the invasionary competition from theme family restaurants and rampant fast-food concepts.

It was assumed by the analysts that only the hardy perennials of the cafeteria community — Laughner's, MCL and Gray Bros. in Mooresville — would remain entrenched through their loyal clientele.

But the affable Mr. Byrd is a big man who thinks big and brings bigness to the entire proceedings, starting with a 42,000-square-foot Colonial-style building, with seating for more than 1,000 people in its main dining room and network of banquet and meeting rooms, and an 88-foot-long serving line groaning with some 200 separate items of food-stuffs.

The spacious dining room, with its early American ambiance, provides a comforting atmosphere, made more so by its capacity as a quasi-art gallery for Norman Rockwell's paintings of warm and fuzzy Americana. As a result, Jonathan Byrd's has enjoyed hefty success, and it is particularly revered by the Sunday after-church patrons.

The length of the serving line serves as the only meaningful exercise you're going to get, as you load the tray from a selection of more than 30 salads and desserts, 15 main entrees and numerous vegetables and rolls. The genius of the cafeteria is that it allows one to prudently choose only those foods that will help you maintain a healthy diet, or allow you to load up and chow down on the home-cooked vittles Grandma used to serve up on Sundays, before she started coaching girls' soccer.



Jonathan Byrd's Cafeteria

Address: 100 Byrd Way,
Main Street and Interstate 65,
Greenwood

Hours: open daily from
10:45 a.m. to 8:45 p.m.

**Complete meal price
range:** \$6 to \$8

Credit cards: Visa and
Mastercard accepted.

Phone: 881-8888

With the latter in mind, I brought with me my son, Matthew, and his collegiate trencherman skills to these proceedings on a Tuesday. I knew it was Tuesday because Swiss chicken, barbecued beef and rice, baked cod, and knockwurst and kraut were on the menu, to go along with the daily staple of fried chicken, carved roast beef and turkey breast, meatloaf, chicken and noodles, ham and beans, and turkey pot pie.

Both of us tend to judge a cafeteria by the quality of its fried chicken, with JB's fried chicken reflecting to Jonathan Byrd's dining roots as a Kentucky Fried Chicken franchisee, with its flavorfully seasoned and crispy skin and moist, tender meat. The Colonel would be impressed. Often cafeteria roast round of beef can be tasty, but dry and chewy. Both Matt and I were quite taken with the tenderness of Byrd's beef, which proved quite lean and highly flavorful.

Matt found the chicken and noodles commendable, the chicken chunks in generous supply and going down well with the authentic mashed potatoes, while I had a delightful reunion with my favorite cafeteria side dishes that apparently can't or won't be made at home, to wit, apricot Jell-O and mutant yeast rolls.

Naturally, at a cafeteria like Byrd's, you cannot avoid dessert, because they are placed at or near the beginning of the line at the point of least resistance. I chose a cream pie — I assumed by its reddish filling to be butterscotch, which I hadn't had in several decades. It turned out to be a new sensation, peanut butter cream, and a wonderfully sweet concoction it is, and no doubt good for me, at least in terms of peace of mind.

Matt and I left — some would say waddled — from the premises, with a full appreciation of why Jonathan Byrd's enjoys a reputation as one of the state's premier cafeteria operations, with its bountiful and economical array of Midwest culinary chestnuts and a cheery staff with keen attention to customer service, fully justifying Mr. Byrd's expensive and expansive gamble 13 years ago.

This being Wednesday, be advised fried liver and onions are on the line tonight. Byrd's aims to please all constituencies.

Veteran restaurant critic Reid Duffy writes a weekly review for the Daily Journal. Comments can be sent to P.O. Box 699, Franklin, IN 46131 or accent@thejournalnet.com.