



Money where your mouth is!

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So have you gotten the Visa bill for that holiday shopping spree yet? Still feeling good about splurging on that 42-inch plasma screen TV with surround sound? Time to cut back on the spending, huh? It won't be easy. But financial restraint doesn't have to mean lining up at the Burger King drive-through. In fact, for little more than the price of a Whopper Combo, you can lunch in luxury.

OK, maybe "luxury" is an exaggeration. Most of the restaurants here are modest counter service eateries. But they're all clean and pleasant, and three of them -- Grasshopper, Piccola Italia and Spice & Curry -- are downright charming, with table service.

And they all offer at least one filling lunch option to satisfy even a gourmet's palate for \$5 or less. That's \$5 for food only. Tax and tip will set you back a little more. As for beverage, water with a squeeze of lemon is quite refreshing.

One more tip: Just because the number of options here comes to a lucky seven, don't take that as a sign from the Lotto gods that you should try to scratch 'n' win your way back to solvency.

Skipper's Fish Fry

1001 E. Williams St., Apex; 303-2400. Fried fish sandwich: \$4.75

You've eaten scores of fish sandwiches over the years. Most were mediocre and some were satisfying, but fish sandwich perfection remained elusive. Finally, at Skipper's Fish Fry, you can land the one that got away. Their fish sandwich lunch special, available 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Saturday, comes with hushpuppies and fries, but it's the fish you'll remember. An impeccably moist and flaky cod filet fried in a New England style cracker meal crust, it's so big it protrudes a good two or three inches from each end of the sesame-spangled bun. Add a little of the house-made tartar sauce if you like. But this is a fish sandwich so good it doesn't need any condiments. It's so good, in fact, that even the bun is optional.

Grasshopper

2002 Hillsborough Road, Durham; 286-1600. Niman Ranch hanging roast pork sandwich: \$5.

Start with the distinctly flavorful pork of Niman Ranch, known for its hormone-free, sustainably raised livestock. Slowly roast the meat to fork tenderness, slice it thin and pile it generously on a toothsome toasted baguette from Guglhupf Bakery. Add lightly pickled vegetables, fresh cilantro and chiles to create a deluxe rendition of the Vietnamese sandwich, banh mi. If you can pull it all together for five bucks, you're in business. If not, get yourself to Grasshopper forthwith.

Sarah's Empanadas

5410 N.C. 55, in Greenwood Commons, Durham/RTP; 544-2441.

Empanada with choice of one side dish: \$4.50.

How does a restaurant open for weekday lunch and whose only entree is a South American street food continue to thrive after nearly two decades in RTP? By making sure the entree -- Bolivian-style empanadas -- is so good people keep coming back. Unlike most empanadas, these crescent-shaped pastries are baked, their flaky crusts stuffed with fillings, from chicken

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Mouthful



Every Monday evening, Durham's Piedmont restaurant offers a four-course meal for \$35.

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