

Mike's Roadkill Café

Pedal to the metal, woman against the road, I was tearing up the miles between Gorman and Sacramento. There's something about the Golden State freeway, Interstate Five, more plainly known as "The Five" to southern California residents, between Gorman and Stockton that just turns my foot into lead. Screaming northwards, nothing but the scenery, drowsy husband and child and my iPod to keep me company I was hell on wheels.

The miles flashed by, the mountains near Gorman and the Tejon Pass melted away into the flat of farmlands and without realizing it I found myself in the heartland. Miles and miles of nothing but farmland. Trees. Crops. Cows. It was going to be a long drive.

Suddenly, like a gift from above a sign came into view. A quaint, old fashioned pedal car with a chubby faced toddler in it announced, "Mike's Roadside Café Ham & Eggs only \$4.99! 65 miles ahead!" Not being one to pass up ham and eggs from a roadside café I decided that we were going to stop there.

The problem with travel these days is that it's all the same.

You can get a Big Mac in New Delhi just as easily as you can in West Los Angeles. And with Kentucky Fried Chicken in 80 different countries, it's a safe bet that if you're in the mood for some finger lickin' chicken, you can lay your hands on it pretty easily. I'm the first one to eschew large, franchised food chains. If I am traveling, I want a little flavor of the place where I am, not some plasticine cheese melted on a piece of rubbery meat patty that probably contains pieces of more cows than I've seen in a lifetime.

Sometimes, this single-minded fervor for finding the flavor gets me in trouble.

Such was the case with Mike's Roadside Café.

Let me start by saying, the location is great. Just when my ass had begun to nod off and my body was starting to beg to be let out of the metal box I call transportation, like a blessing, the café appeared on the horizon. My heart leapt and impossibly my foot pushed down harder on the accelerator. I hit the exit at 95 miles an hour, terrifying my family and the people in the car ahead of us, but I didn't care: I was on a mission. We pulled up to the restaurant and were slightly amused at all of the strange displays pushed to the side in a patio area. Empty and covered with dust, I

wondered what they were, and more importantly why were they outside, but the rumble in my stomach distracted me.

The first thing that greeted me was a giant sign warning me that the city of Kettleman was watching me and I had better be on my best behavior. Unlawful behavior, it warned, was swiftly dealt with. I was properly chastised. We were greeted by a pleasant general store style lobby with postcards, bumper stickers, key chains and the ilk lining a narrow walkway that ended at a wall. To the right there was the restaurant, to the left, a stunningly dusty display of souvenir replica pedal cars. Oh boy. We chose the right and were led through a warren of tatty booths to our own little table.

The Naugahyde was cracked and taped over with Duct tape, so I thought we'd be in good hands. The Formica table top was less than gleaming, and I was almost rubbing my hands in glee. I am of the opinion that Naugahyde and Formica are signs of a well used diner and well used usually means good food. The keyword here is *usually*.

Who knows what should have tipped me off first?

Maybe the indifferent clomp of the greeter as she walked us to our table with the graceless stomp of an African elephant; head down, eyes on the carpet, feet loudly clomping with every step. It could have been the

syrup rings on the Formica table top, or the forlorn look of the laminated menus. All I know is that the signs were there in abundance, but in typical fashion, I ignored them.

My first mistake was coming in.

The second was ordering a chicken quesadilla.

Who knew that you could kill a chicken quesadilla in such a gruesome manner? There I was thinking that nobody could screw up a quesadilla; after all, it's just a tortilla, some melted cheese and a few bits of chicken. A half-wit could put one together. And, for crying out loud, I was still in California!

Oh, how wrong I was.

At first glance I thought maybe they thought I ordered the Cajun Quesadilla—blackened. Then as I warily picked up my first piece and chowed down I was surprised by a nubby, chewy, yet strangely crispy piece of meat. They called it chicken, but my mouth figured it to be road kill. It tasted like it had been scraped off the highway and cooked: the chewy, gamy taste mixed with the crispy grit of asphalt didn't really do anything for my stomach. I quickly put it aside and gulped down some of my soda.

Which, for the record tasted like weak syrup mixed with hose-water. While I gulped weak soda, my child and husband ate stale crackers from tiny cellophane packets and played a little peg game, thoughtfully provided by

the establishment to distract us and keep our minds off of how long lunch was taking to find down on Highway Five. That's when I made my third mistake: visiting the bathroom.

Why is it that some places see fit to turn the air conditioning system off in bathrooms? Does it really add that much more to the electric bill to refrigerate a public toilet? Because, truthfully, I would gladly be willing to donate a dollar or a percentage of my bill towards air conditioning the toilet at Mike's Roadhouse Café. Really. I opened the door and was brutally assaulted by the fetid, moist smell of a woman's restroom without proper ventilation. The change in temperature from the dining area to the swampy restroom chilled my skin as the smell chilled my belly. Later I was to believe that that bathroom doubled as their storage facility for some of the foodstuffs that ended up on my plate as unidentifiable fried objects. But right then I was fighting to keep my Quesadilla a la Highway down.

I made haste and tried to get back to my table as quickly as possible. On my way back I was *not* amused to see that the staff of this questionable establishment were grouped sullenly at the service bar, talking to each other in hushed, furtive whispers. I ignored them and made my way to the table. My husband glared and my daughter just looked in awe and fear at the vast display of pedal cars that were displayed all around the room.

Held in place by what seemed like a small piece of a two by four nailed down in front of a back tire, there were many different styles and kinds of old fashioned children's cars. It's hard to eat when you are in constant fear of being creamed by a 20lb car that has finally caved in to gravity and come sailing down from its perch on the ceiling.

During my perusal of the vast and varied quantity of cars I noticed the flies. I abhor flies, especially in restaurants. Nothing turns me off of my food quicker than seeing a fly land on the wall or table near me. I was lucky, because the flies that inhabit Mike's Roadhouse Café are just a little too fat and a tad too lazy to land. I'm not sure what that says for the restaurant, but it's not very appealing. There were at least seven to ten flies, all of them fat and lazy, drowsily circling around our heads as if they hadn't a care in the world. They seemed to say, "Don't worry, we know there will be plenty left for us later." They were right.

By the time our entrees had arrived I was starting to feel queasy and the sight of a cluster of unidentifiable fried *things* grouped haphazardly on my plate next to a pile of soggy, disillusioned fries only made my stomach worse. It was back to the bathroom for me. This trip wasn't quite as long as the previous one, and I was out and back on my way to the table. Again, I walked by the staff, who were, once again, grouped around the service bar,

whispering to each other. I quickened my pace and didn't bother sitting back down when I got to the table. "I'm leaving," I said as I grabbed the check, which must have been delivered while I was in the sweatbox of a restroom. "I'll be up front." And with that I stalked out.

My thirst for new things and belief that we should support small businesses and independently owned restaurants has gotten me in trouble before. But, for the first time, I felt like I was escaping with my life when I left Mike's Roadhouse Café. For a mere \$39 and change I was treated to truly horrid food but I also escaped with a keener appreciation for my life. As soon as we were strapped back into the car, my foot found the pedal and we were back on the Five, tearing up the miles between Nowhere, California (also known as Kettleman City) and Sacramento.