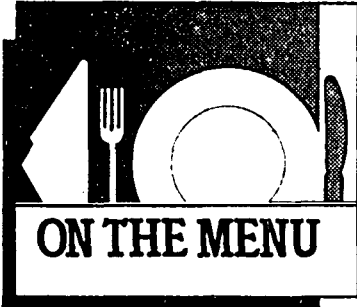


## Church Cafe: a bargain-priced binge, without the ballerinas

**I** WAS only the little ballerinas who bothered me, and it was obviously not their fault. They couldn't help making me feel like a lump of mashed potatoes with two arms and two legs — it's even possible that they didn't know the effect their presence had. There I would be, trying to enjoy a bowl of the Amsterdam's thick rich split pea soup with ham and a sandwich. I would be contemplating going right over the top with one of their lovely pastries, and a gaggle of pubescent ballerinas would walk in. They couldn't help it; the National Ballet School was, after all, around the corner from the Amsterdam, and even ballerinas have to eat sometimes. But there it is. My lunch would be ruined. The guilt, the terror of the dreaded calorie attack would be so great as to wipe out all desire.

None of this was the Amsterdam's fault. However, it did go bankrupt in November 1982. The Amsterdam had been a Church Street institution, a minor marvel appropriately revered for its thick soups, fresh pastries, perfect sandwiches. It had prospered and expanded, opening a restaurant at 485 Church St., one door north of the original bakery/deli, and a delicious branch-plant at Harbourfront. The Harbourfront outlet survived the bankruptcy but the two Church Street



Amsterdam's were sold in December 1982.

A Dutch family bought the original bakery at 483 Church St., and they simply continue to operate it. The restaurant at 485 was bought by two men who own the green grocer one door north of it. Because they sell wholesale produce to restaurants as well, they had connections in kitchens, and they succeeded in enticing French chef Patrice Bellouard away from Daniel & Daniel. They redecorated the restaurant and opened it six weeks ago as the Church Street Cafe.

It has an elegant look to it, with grey-

blue walls, grey tablecloths and a plain grey light hanging over every table. One could live without the banal vehicle prints on the wall and the unrelenting nostalgia of the music (mostly from the sixties), but these are small blemishes on an otherwise lovely face. It is easy to forgive the serving up of stale Mick Jagger over hors d'oeuvres when you're getting a plate of mussels in creamed curry for \$2.10. Yes, that's right.

The Church Street Cafe's prices are ridiculous. They sell seafood pâté for \$2.25. Fresh salmon with Champagne sauce for \$5.95. Two roasted quails for \$7.95. Escargots sauteed with green peppercorns, shallots and cream, in a patty shell (oh gilded lily) for \$2.50. These people haven't heard of inflation. The bottom line is that a gracelessly piggish dinner for two will cost \$25 with tax, tip and no alcohol. The Cafe expects its liquor licence in April, given the blessing of the gods of the LLBO.

At those prices the food doesn't have to be very good to be worth it. And it isn't.

But it will do. The aforementioned mussels in curried cream are plump and fresh, even if their sauce is heavy. The leek and stilton cheese in a diamond of puff pastry, resembles a too-thick cream sauce but it will do. The fresh lotte, which

is a firm fleshed Mediterranean fish that zealous fish mongers often compare to lobster (it's called monkfish in English) is overcooked and thus rubbery, but it is fresh. Its cream sauce is friendly but uninspired, but then who expects inspiration for \$4.75, especially when the carrots and the broccoli are fresh and crunchy? The equally economical quails are the best moment of the meal: perfectly roasted to sweet juiciness, they are a pleasure to defile. Their advertised pâté stuffing,

however, owes more to the supermarket liverwurst school of thought. The fresh grape sauce is a nondescript pan gravy with a few green grapes on the side, *pace* nouvelle cuisine.

For dessert we eat a pleasant strawberry bavarian dressed in white cake, and chocolate truffle cake which would be okay if half the sugar was eliminated. But at least there are no anorectic ballerinas to make me gag on every mouthful.