

EATS

By Sylvia Carter

STAFF WRITER

LET'S CUT STRAIGHT to the chase. I am not going to praise everything about Three of Cups. But I love it, and I could go back there every night to eat mickeys, potatoes char-baked in the wood-oven fire.

This is about as close as you can come to a potato roast in New York City, something I have always wished for. Besides the eating pleasure involved, there is a literary resonance to a potato roast; In Jane Bowles' short story "Plain Pleasures," Alva Perry and John Drake built a fire for roasting potatoes outside. As the spuds cooked, she asked, "Do you like plain pleasures?"

She went on to explain: "Plain pleasures, like the ones that come without crowds or fancy food. Plain pleasures like this potato bake instead of dancing and whisky and bands. Like a picnic but not the kind with a thousand extra things that get thrown out in a ditch because they don't get eaten up. I've seen grown people throw cakes away because they were too lazy to wrap them up and take them back home."

"Don't you think that plain pleasures are closer to the heart of God?"

In the story, Mr. Drake did not answer immediately, but *my* answer is a fervent yes.

Of course, there are many good things about Three of Cups. (In the Tarot deck, Three of Cups stands for abundance and fertility.) There are roomy wooden booths, a brick oven fired by wood, quirky chandeliers, a large cement hippo, seltzer out of siphon bottles and bottles of Gato Negro, a Chilean Cabernet Sauvignon for only \$10. Some days there may be an exuberant, peppery vegetable soup based on escarole, or slender stalks of steamed asparagus with a dusting of Parmesan.

THREE OF CUPS

83 First Ave., at Fifth Street
(212) 388-0059

WHY: Potatoes and pizza from a wood-burning oven.

WHEN: 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. daily.

HOW MUCH: Pizzas \$5.50 to \$15.50, potatoes \$2.75.

Always on the menu are many kinds of thin-crust pizza and roasted garlic cloves with crostini, or little toasts. Grilled calamari were beautiful and tasty, unadorned (no breading) save for a simple tomato-based dipping sauce. The first time we had the garlic was better than the next, when the garlic was the big, elephant-ear variety, which is never as flavorful. A large mixed salad was ruined by the weirdly sweet dressing. (Ask for salad plain and use the jug of olive oil that's on the table for bread, a splash of dry red wine from the bottle you are drinking and a squeeze of lemon to make your own vinaigrette.)

But those wood-oven potatoes, served on spinach leaves, were reason to rejoice. The skins are properly crisp, the insides steamy perfection. At \$2.75 each, a couple of these potatoes, mashed with butter or olive oil would make a most satisfactory meal.

Of the six or seven pizzas we sampled, we liked best the one made with a few tiny artichokes, rosemary and thyme. Chicken and escarole with roasted garlic, margherita made with mozzarella and fresh basil, and spicy eggplant and garlic were all pleasant toppings. The garnishes might be considered skimpy by some, but the airy, well-made crust would likely become soggy under a heavier load.

The white pizza, made with ricotta, mozzarella, fresh spinach and garlic, was tame but would likely be improved with a shake of red pepper, should you happen to have some in your pocket. (Perhaps, as a friend suggested, we should all go around with a little kit of rations to use for improving restaurant food.) Potato slices on the potato-and-roasted-pepper pizza seemed too thick and not brown enough.

Pasta was less than inspired; the best one we sampled was a cozy rigatoni with broccoli rabe and cheese and parsley sausage.

Desserts were chocolate intensive — brownies laced with raspberry, mega-chocolate cake, a large, crisp chocolate cookie served with dollops of whipped cream for dipping. Tiramisu was heavy on sponge cake, low on mascarpone, but the coffee flavor was pleasingly strong. Sometimes there is bread pudding made with apples and raisins. Pallid port and good biscotti, and a basket of fruit and mixed nuts (not available the night we asked) are the elegant desserts.

And surely you will want good, strong espresso after seeing the motto above the coffee section of the menu: "measure out your life with coffee," a partial paraphrase from T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The quote takes on a different meaning when you omit the word "spoons" after the word "coffee." I like the new way better.

Another motto, printed on Three of Cups' business cards, is "member of the clean plate club." There also is a recessed arch to hold a statue of St. Francis of Assisi at the base of the brick oven and colored potions arrayed below a medieval-looking oil portrait of a monkey beside the door. It's a wacky place, but I like it.

Later in that same Bowles' story, Alva Perry said, "I don't pay much mind to what I eat unless it's a potato bake like this." Me, either. / ■■

Look for *BQ Eats* in *FanFare Sunday*.