

# entertainment

## Brownstone brings class on a budget

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If you are desperate for food that is not mass-produced in a campus cafeteria, anxious for a little variety and the opportunity to get what you want, or curious if it is even possible to find all of this on a student's budget; the solution rests right in the heart of Middletown. There is one restaurant that delivers on promises of great food, copious options, and inordinately low prices: The Brownstone Café.

You may not realize that the building at the 1 N. Union Street is actually a bustling eatery. In fact, one look at its turn of the century stone exterior may confuse onlookers into thinking it is actually a bank. The reason for this is simple, it was. According to the Brownstone Café's placemat (a strangely informative place setting) in 1893 it was the National Bank of Middletown. Over the years it would change ownership and name from the Farmers Bank to the Farmers Trust Company of Middletown, from the National Bank and Trust of Central Pennsylvania to the National Central Bank. In 1983 it became Hamilton Bank, a Core State Bank, giving the building more than one hundred years of servicing the community as a financial institution.

Because of its beautiful, natural stone architecture and its celebrated significance, the Middletown Historical Restoration Commission presented the Commission's Plaque, designating the building as a historic Middletown landmark. Little did they realize that in 1998, it would become a local attraction for a completely different reason.

Keith and Carole Matinckek, area natives and chefs, converted the building interior and made it the town's premier restaurant. Walking through the doors, one immediately notices the lingering presence of the past. A bank vault door stands alongside the entrance to a busy kitchen. Safety deposit boxes and a large decorative safe serve as waitress stations for coffee pots and utensils. The walls are adored in black and white photographs featuring the by-gone days of carriages and antique cars in the Middletown square. A glance at the front wall shows a proud history for the restaurant itself, five framed awards from Central PA Magazine including family dining (2005) and casual American (2006-09).

The awards are no surprise to regulars like Tom Germak. An area electrician, he eats at the café about once a month by his estimates. As the chill of fall approaches, you can find him taking out hot lunches and coffee to his work crews. When asked how he would describe it, he summed it up in just a few words.

"Very nice," he begins, "quality food and nice people." A simple, but good description. Perhaps the main sign puts it in better terms: "Brownstone Café, your family restaurant."

Few embody and understand the family concept better than long time employee and assistant manager Tanyan Lukesh. She has been with the business for 10 of its 11 years, working her way from busser, to hostess, to her current position.

"I think it's more personal," Tanyan explains. "We get a lot of regulars that come in, some that have known Keith since he was a kid." She goes on to point out that both the Matinckek son and daughter have worked the floor helping out mom and dad. This sense of family translates into a warm, welcoming atmosphere and providing superb service.

Of course, fantastic, friendly service means little to the hungry patron without tasty meals. Fortunately, the Brownstone has more than enough. The menu boasts several excellent choices.

"Each person's different," says Lukesh of the menu options, "that's why it's nice to have the variety so, they have a wide range to choose from." You might wonder if there is a particular favorite amongst the items but, as Tayan notes, "we sell a lot of everything so, it's hard to tell ... the absolute favorite."

For a quick lunch that will warm you up, I recommend the delicious variety of soups. The cream of crab has gained notoriety as being a sure winner at only \$3.95 for a bowl. One patron even confided that she adds salt to everything but, never added a grain to the flavor of the seafood soup. I personally like the beef and barely, one of the rotating daily specials, which pares wonderfully with a roast beef on sourdough

sandwich for \$5.95. If that sounds like a good price then you may want to try the quesadillas. Made with two cheeses, bacon, tomatoes, scallions, and jalapenos served alongside salsa, sour cream, and guacamole, these Mexican inspired treats are sure to satisfy. If you are in the mood for more Pennsylvanian fare, you must try the *pierogi* sautéed in olive, onions, and fresh garlic for \$5.75. If you share them with a friend, you will be bosom buddies for life. Served in generous portions, it is food that my grandmother told me would "stick to your ribs and make your taste-buds dance."

If you are looking for something a little more substantial, you may want to try one of the daily specials. Monday boasts an all-you-can-eat chicken and waffle plate with two sides for \$6.95. Tuesday has a similar offer for all-you-can-eat ham and green beans with tow sides at the same cost. Wednesday gives us all-you-can-eat chicken pot pie which fills the booths and tables with hungry regulars. While Thursday has no all-you-can-eat offers, it does boast two Italian classics. The lasagna and eggplant parmesan are both highly recommended. Each filling bite will remind you why you decided to eat at the Brownstone. The tossed salad and garlic bread only entice you come back. Friday features seafood, including batter dipped fresh haddock, fresh catch of the day, and the tantalizing seafood chemise in sherry cream sauce and wrapped in a fillo dough. At \$13.95, it may be a little more expensive than most menu items, but seafood fans will love it.

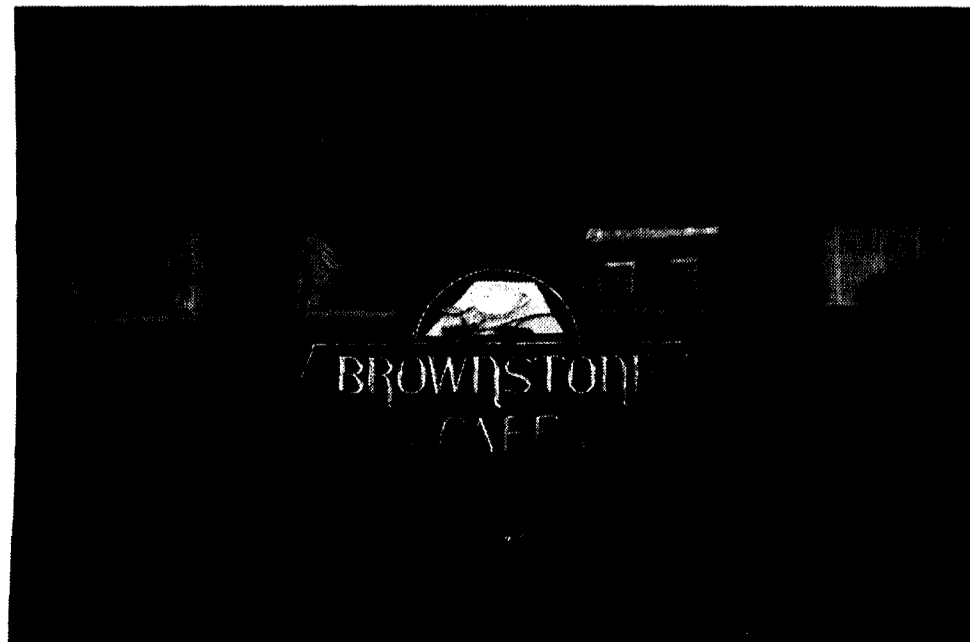
If you have set aside a little extra cash, then you may want to indulge in some of the Brownstones steaks. I say the 8 oz. filet mignon with mushroom caps is worth a \$17.95 price-tag for the juicy cut of beef. I would even shell out the extra buck-fifty for the added sautéed onions and mushrooms. For the seafood inclined, save those precious student dollars for the jumbo lump crab cakes. They were the only menu item Lukesh identified as a personal favorite. I cannot think of a better referral than that.

For our vegetarian readers, steaks and seafood may not be a choice. While the variety of the Brownstone menu offers many meat-free options, there are two I would like to mention. The first is the Veggie sandwich. With an assortment of grilled marinated vegetables, alfalfa sprouts and brownstone mayonnaise served on sourdough bread, even a carnivore will sink their teeth into this delicious item for \$4.95. The second is the Brownstone Penne. At \$9.95, this generous collection of sautéed tomatoes, garlic, zucchini, mushrooms, onions, and broccoli with salad and garlic bread can easily be two meals at a great price.

If you have somehow finished a meal at the Brownstone Café and still want dessert (perhaps you were wise and saved half in a take-out box), you have another list of options. I personally would stop you on two—the peanut butter and the chocolate cream pies. Many come to the restaurant for the made-from-scratch strawberry pie. The strawberry pie certainly a delicious seasonal favorite, however, it is the year round cream pies that always make my mouth water. Made with a thin crust and a layer of chocolate under a thick heap of creamy goodness, the cream pies are sure to please. While preparing for this article, I offered a friend a slice in exchange for fixing my computer. The man not only finished the task, he still considers himself in my debt for offering the decadent pie slice. Whether for you or as a bribe, the desserts at the Brownstone are worth a stop.

So, if you are bored with Stack's Market and want great food and services at even better prices, the Brownstone Café is a definite must for breakfast, lunch or dinner. A mere five minutes from campus, you owe it to yourself to try one of Middletown's best restaurants. Grab a friend, hop in the car, and drive on down to this historic landmark to enjoy an excellent home-style meal. Be sure to ask about the daily specials both on and off the menu. The staff will be happy to see you. As Lukesh says when asked about Penn State Harrisburg students at the café, "the more, the merrier." Happy eating everyone!

The Brownstone Café is located at 1 N. Union Street, Middletown, PA 17057. Parking is in rear of the building (across from the Elk's Theater) or you may utilize street parking.



Jenna DeNoyelles/The Capital Times