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SYLVIA RECTOR

Some of the best places have the best deals -- if you're early

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I envy retirees. They can go to happy hour.

When your normal workday lasts until 6:30 or 7 most nights, or you have to drive straight home from work to meet the kids, you miss out on some of the best food and drink deals around.

If you haven't noticed recently, late afternoon menu prices are low enough to make almost anyone happy -- even folks who don't punch a clock anymore.

But you have to look around and do your research. Some venues are much more aggressive about happy-hour pricing than others, and some who have great offers don't always display them prominently on their Web sites.

If you're checking there for information, you may have to click around to find the menu, which is usually separate from the regular menu.

And in an unexpected but welcome change, you'll find some of the best deals at some of the best places -- places you might not think about going if you live on a budget.

Here's a sample from around the area:

- Roast at the Westin Book Cadillac in Detroit packs the house with its \$3 appetizers, which include a hefty 8-ounce house-ground hamburger, beast-of-the-day tacos, chicken livers and polenta, and sausage-stuffed hot peppers. Select drafts and wines by the glass are \$4; well cocktails, \$5.
- Big Rock Chophouse in Birmingham features nine popular items priced \$2-\$4, including its signature calamari with lemon-caper sauce, port-and-red-wine-braised beef short ribs with mashers, and crab and salmon cakes with corn salsa. The house-brewed beer is \$2; house wine is \$3, and signature cocktails are \$5.
- In Clinton Township at J. Baldwin's Restaurant and To-Go, prices range from \$3 to \$6 for 15 items, including two 8-inch pizzas; pulled pork, Black Angus or crab cake sliders, and an imported cheese tray with seasonal honeys, sweet pickles and freshly baked bread.
- In Royal Oak, D'Amato's features 10 sophisticated offerings such as pastrami-cured salmon with Boursin cheese, garnishes and crostini for \$5, and a trio of \$4 pizzas, including the Bianca with Pecorino and mozzarella cheese, herbs and fresh-shaved zucchini. More than 20 specialty drinks are around \$5, and beer, wine by the glass and well cocktails are half off.

- Mt. Clemens' Bath City Bistro's entire appetizer menu is half price, so favorites including the batter-fried Foot of Onion Rings, steak-stuffed portabella and tub of mussels range from \$3 to \$4. Drink deals include \$4 martinis and \$1.50 beers.

Happy hours benefit restaurants and bars because they bring in people at a time when the place might otherwise be empty. And even with their low food prices, they're still making money -- one way or another.

"Liquor and beer is where you make your profit, so even with the cheaper prices on food," it's a good business move, says Bath City Bistro owner Stephanie Sevin.

Big Rock Chophouse manager Vera Day Riser sees happy hour as a way to introduce people to the restaurant; first-timers might become regulars. And the promotions bring life to the bar at a slow time.

"Having people there when people come in for dinner gives the place energy; it's almost like advertising," she says. "We're not making money at it. But ... we're letting people experience the place. It's a very effective and inexpensive way to advertise what we do."

And for customers on a budget, it can be a very effective way to get some great food at a good price.

Contact restaurant critic SYLVIA RECTOR: 313-222-5026 or srector@freepress.com
