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Mystery Diner - Order a dog, lemonade with a twist at Shamrock

AT A GLANCE: The Shamrock, 300 W. Walnut St. 926-8511. Store open 8 a.m.-8 p.m. weekdays, 8 a.m.-6 p.m. weekends. Drive-through window open 8 a.m.- 8:30 p.m. weekdays, 8 a.m.-6:30 p.m. weekends. Credit cards, call-in orders accepted.

Inside the waiting area of most Johnson City restaurants, you can expect the standard props: a few wooden benches, stacks of electronic pagers, guests leaning against the bar waiting for a table, a copy of the menu framed on the wall, a tin of toothpicks and after-dinner mints and sometimes an aquarium of fish.

But at a hometown "eatery" situated at the corner of Buffalo and Walnut, the scene is quite different — magazines and comics, paperbacks, a selection of stylish pipes and just about any tobacco product you can imagine.

The sign arching above the front door of the Shamrock bills the establishment as a tobacco and beverage shop. And if there is gold at the end of this rainbow, it can certainly be found at the food counter near the back of the store.

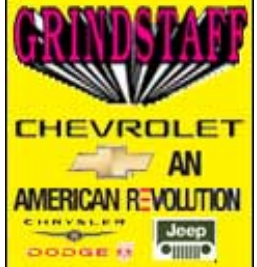
Inside the Shamrock, you will notice immediately the rich, welcoming scent of the tobacco items — the good smell, not the offensive cigarette odor that attempts to suffocate you at many bars and, unfortunately, some restaurants in town.

There is nothing pretentious about the deli area. It's a simple counter, behind which the employees stand and prepare the orders.

There's no fancy menu; just a basic black sign with removable letters. Yet it is here where you can order one of the best hot dogs Johnson City has to offer.

I know that is a rather bold statement, but I have very selective tastes when it comes to hot dogs. For every good one I've eaten at a restaurant, there have been five bad ones someplace else. Or maybe even six.

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My problem with most hot dogs is that they are just too messy to eat. Everything seems to fall apart before the first bite.

Those at the Shamrock, however, hold together quite well, even if you (and I encourage you to) order slaw on top. It's the chili that makes the hot dog. Unlike other places, it is not as greasy or heavy, and the dog itself has a juicy flavor. The staff will also toast the bun so there is just the right amount of crispness but it's not overdone.

Add some onions and mustard and you have one dandy of a combination.

It took me a while before I tried other things on the menu. For a lighter lunch, you can opt for the grilled cheese. You can pick the type of bread and cheese you want and order lettuce, mayo, and tomato if you wish.

It's your basic grilled cheese, nothing fancy, but it's perfect if you want something light. Other items I've tried and would recommend are the ham sandwich and tuna salad.

One of their signature items is the lemonade. I love lemonade any time, but especially with hot dogs. And at the Shamrock, you have the option of ordering freshly squeezed orange with your lemonade.

That's right, I said orange.

I was a bit skeptical until I gave it a try, but I am glad I did. I was surprised by how well the tastes complemented each other. Swing through the drive-through one afternoon on your way home and order a glass of lemonade with orange. Let me know what you think.

And ice cream lovers, take note. Shamrock knows how to make a classic milkshake. They have an assortment of flavors — not just chocolate, vanilla and strawberry — and you can order them regular or thick. Sometimes I go just for a milkshake.

Just about all of the orders are carry-out, but there are a few tables in the back room. Apparently, from what I hear, that is a "social spot" among Johnson Citians and has been for many years.

I'm sure some of the tales told back there could make for a separate story itself.

Reach the Mystery Diner at diner@johnsoncitypress.com.