

CHEAP EATS

Deals on meals

Eating out doesn't have to break the bank. Savour our top 10 cheap eateries that don't compromise on flavour, reports Sarah Lang

Ah, those poor student days — when shelling out for a \$5 kebab had you scrabbling to scrape together the bus fare home. Even though those destitute days pass, many of us often like a modest meal out. After all, it doesn't have to be pricey and there's nothing like a delicious dish arriving in front of you minus the supermarket queue, hot-stove slaving or the dishes. Then again, what with an entree, a main, a glass or two of wine, and dessert or a coffee to finish, it's all too easy to blow your budget.

So how to eat out on the cheap? To start with, don't arrive ravenous — have a piece of fruit or a small snack beforehand to take the edge off. No one will be offended if you simply order a main, or two starters — that'll usually fill you up.

Sharing's both frugal and fun, especially if you're out with a big group. Go somewhere known for generous portions and order, say, three meals between five, plant them in the middle of the table and taste each. Look for a BYO place — wine lists are the big mark-up — and ask for tap water. And save that final post-meal hot chocolate or coffee until you're home.

Still, such strategies aren't much use if your main alone clocks in at \$39. So here's our pick of 10 top cheap eats.

UNDER \$20

Canton Café

477 New North Rd, Kingsland, ph (09) 846 7888

This Chinese restaurant is a massive step-up from foodcourt fare at a hardly-hiked price: mains are as cheap as \$8.50; most between \$14-\$18. Its also a ditherer's dream: there's an astonishing 119 mains on offer with a vast vegetarian selection (it's hard to go past the mixed veggies with tofu, deliciously thick with a variety of veg).

You're unlikely to dent the overflowing pots, so share, or take a doggie bag home — and the complimentary green tea on arrival and fruit slices at meal's end are lovely touches. BYO with corkage just \$1.

Mr Yung's Steamboat

248a Dominion Rd, Mt Eden, ph (09) 638 6458

If you're game for something new, Mr Yung's Steamboat is a must try. Choose dozens of chopped-up morsels from trolleys to add to soup in your own steamboat (it looks like an ancient warrior's hat with boiling water in the brim). Be brave with the likes of tripe and offal, or tame with the usual suspects of chicken, seafood, veggies — plus



you're in control of the spiciness. All you can chow for \$18.80.

Mezze Bar

9 Durham St East, Auckland central, ph (09) 307 2029

With its cosy, casual ambience, this Mediterranean-style mecca is often busy but worth the wait. While mains are on offer, we like to make up a selection of tapas and mezze to share. The generous servings are filling once you've sampled a few — the bowl of feta with chilli, lemon and home-made bread is a must try. Split the bill and it's easy enough to pay \$20 or less each, unless you're imbibing (wine list, not BYO).

Love a Duck

302 Dominion Rd, Balmoral, ph (09) 638 7528

This "Hong-Kong-style" Chinese restaurant is cheap, cheerful, and best of all offers tastier fare than most pricier places. Duck and pork are specialties, but the steamed blue cod is flavoured to perfection and there's enough veggie options to tempt the most committed carnivore. BYO.

Punjabi Dhaba

308 Te Irirangi Dr, Botany South; 9 Parkway Dr, Botany Downs; 11 Litten Rd, Cockle Bay, ph 0800 4 DHABA

With its stylish decor and solicitous service, this doesn't feel like a chain restaurant. The extensive menu spans Indian, Indian-Chinese fusion, and Manchurian: all mains are under \$20, most about \$16. Entree



Mezze Bar (above) and Belgian Beer Café



honeyed cauliflower and main Navratan Korma (vegetables in a cashew-nut gravy, infused with rose water) are two of the more unusual — and delicious — dishes. BYO.

UNDER \$10

Hare Krishna Food For Life

286 K Rd, ph (09) 300 7585

Usually Hare Krishna food requires a masters in architectural art — piling up your own plate as high as you can for around \$10. Instead, this establishment serves up a vegan-friendly, tasty meal of veggie curry, rice, dahl, pakora and semolina pudding, all for just \$5 (\$4 for students). Great for lunch but you'll have to eat dinner early — it closes at 7pm.

Belgian Beer Café

75-79 Tamaki Dr, Mission Bay, ph (09) 578 3327; and 1 St Marys Rd, Ponsonby, ph (09) 376 6092

It's easy to become fond of gigantic mussel pots (with frites 'n' mayo). Even large stomachs would struggle in a solo attempt, so share the grub and the bill between two (\$9 each).

Food Alley

9-11 Albert St, Auckland central, ph (09) 373 4917

Fair enough if the fluoro lighting puts you off, but don't assume all foodcourts churn out bland, boring food. This Thor of foodcourts sets high standards, leaving only the matter of what to choose: there's Asian, Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Malaysian, Noodle, Thai

and Vietnamese outlets at around \$7 per dish. It's hard to beat the Malaysian mushroom larb, unless you fancy Thai vegetarian noodles with basil.

Ponsonby Village International Foodcourt

Upstairs, 106 Ponsonby Rd, Ponsonby, ph (09) 361 5398

Travel to a different country every time you eat at the PVIF, a close second for top foodcourt honours. The Thai, Laos and Vietnamese places are all excellent.

Little Turkish Café, 217 Karangahape Rd, ph (09) 302 0353

Even when sober it's hard to go past the kebab — and there's plenty of establishments where you can make it a sit-down meal, complete with ambience. Like the Little Turkish Café on K Rd, where you get a sweet treat with the bill still under \$10.

WHAT NOT TO DO

So really, who needs to be a cheapskate?

- Don't order something tiny to eat, pull a morose face and look longingly at your friends' meals, until they let you pick off their plates. (Eventually they'll stop inviting you.)

- Don't pretend it's your birthday or flirt desperately with the waiters to get free extras.

- As for the dine and dash, it's not as fun as it looks in the movies, even when you're a hungry cash-strapped student. Honest.