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MYSTERY DINER - Taste Budz serves good home cooking downtown

AT A GLANCE: Taste Budz. Roan Street across from Munsey Memorial United Methodist Church. 926-9304. Open 10 a.m.-2 p.m. weekdays. Checks accepted. No credit cards.

Along the streets of downtown Johnson City, you can expect to see the usual passers-by: businessmen and women in suits talking on cell phones, various window shoppers and a mini-van full of kids descending on the Hands On! Regional Museum.

Recently, I began spotting a number of those people, particularly during the noon hour, carrying Styrofoam to-go trays and cups. Someone somewhere was cooking something.

The trail led back to a tiny building across from Munsey Memorial United Methodist Church, a restaurant so small a man might have to step outside to change his mind.

At Taste Budz, which made its debut in September, the staff won't be asking the number in your party or whether you want smoking or nonsmoking. This place specializes in carry-out orders, and the only resemblance to a dining room is the picnic tables out front.

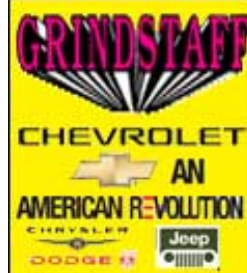
Don't let the size of this eatery mislead you. Some of the most delicious home-cooked meals await you on the other side of the pick-up window.

When you place your order, most likely you will be greeted by Lorraine. I've deduced she runs the place, and I've found her to be one of the most charming and friendly women working at a restaurant counter.

A daily menu, which will vary depending on the specials, is posted on the window. Usual items include salads, hot dogs and warm, hearty bowls of soup beans — cooked to perfection and served with corn bread.

I was so tempted to ask Lorraine how she prepares her meat loaf. The

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spices and stuffing she uses bring out an exotic taste to this traditional, and sometimes blah, dish. I definitely would recommend this special if available on your next visit.

She has served ribs also. Keep in mind, these aren't barbecued ribs, so you don't have to worry about needing a bib. The meat was tender and rich with flavor.

Ask Lorraine for her e-mail address. If you send her yours, she'll notify you about daily specials.

For the sides, and depending on the day, you can choose from sweet potatoes, fresh greens or potato salad. Again, I would love to have her recipe for potato salad, as it would delight my family and friends during holiday entertaining. One of my complaints about potato salad is that the ingredients sometimes upstage the other, i.e. too much mayo or too much potato. Taste Budz has a nice combination, and the ingredients seem to be in harmony with each other.

The slaw, which I have ordered just about every time, is finely chopped, holds its taste and consistency well and is not immersed in a shallow pool of juices.

OK, I can just about read your mind. The food sounds good, but where the heck do I park? I parked at Munsey and walked down, and I saw several people who got spaces right there by the hut. Besides, a little exercise never hurt anyone. I reminded myself of that as I carried my tray of ribs back to my car.

Reach the Mystery Diner at

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