

RIP-OFF REPORTS RUBBISHED



The restaurant industry is by and large much too sensible to argue with the media, but a survey has shown that most of the reports, allegations and commentary about restaurant prices were rubbish.

Over the past festive season newspapers, radio, television and internet media devoted much space and time to allegations and comment about "rip-off prices" at restaurants in the V&A Waterfront in particular and Cape Town in general. Most of these accounts were short on detail and facts, but nevertheless

prompted huge headlines and much discussion in an assortment of radio chatshows hosted by people who rarely pay restaurant bills.

In response, the V&A Waterfront commissioned an independent, in-depth survey to analyse and compare food prices of restaurants in the V&A Waterfront with those in greater Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Twenty restaurants (including One Waterfront, Baia, Belthazar, Balducci, Waterfront Café and Emily's) were selected from the V&A Waterfront and compared with 20 similar restaurants within the greater Cape Town area as well as 20 in Johannesburg. The survey looked at the pricing of beverages, starters, main courses (including seafood, red meat, vegetarian and poultry dishes) and desserts.

The restaurants were also rated in terms of quality of food, staff friendliness, service and efficiency as well as value for money. Regarding quality of food, restaurants at the V&A Waterfront, in greater Cape Town and in Johannesburg all rated good to very good.

In terms of service and efficiency, restaurants within the V&A Waterfront received a higher rating than the restaurants situated in greater Cape Town and Johannesburg. 80% of evaluators rated service and efficiency at the V&A Waterfront as very good to good, 60% rated restaurants within greater Cape Town as very good to good, while 68% of evaluators rated the service and efficiency of Johannesburg restaurants as good to very good.

On value for money, restaurants within Johannesburg received a higher rating of 78% with the V&A Waterfront coming close behind with a 70% rating. Restaurants within greater Cape Town received 45% with most evaluators feeling the value for money was average.

The upper- and lower-end charges across all items were measured. There was no discernable difference between the three areas across the board. What this showed is that cheaper items are available in each area if patrons shop around and look first.

Taking a closer look at the pricing of beverages, there were only marginal differences in the average cost between the various restaurants with very little difference between the average cost of, for example, a cappuccino, Appletizer or Castle Lager.

With respect to starter courses, there was little difference between the three areas on average. With respect to seafood starters in particular, restaurants within greater Cape Town were more expensive than those in the V&A Waterfront and in Johannesburg.

Red meat main courses at restaurants within the V&A Waterfront and greater Cape Town were marginally more expensive than restaurants found in Johannesburg, although the difference in pricing was a few rands in most cases. The most noticeable difference was the average cost of game as a main course. Johannesburg was found to be less expensive than restaurants in

Cape Town, with the exception of ostrich, which was the same at the Waterfront and in Johannesburg, both cheaper than greater Cape Town.

The most surprising result was found in the pricing of seafood, specifically crayfish, between Cape Town and Johannesburg. On average, crayfish dishes were generally more expensive in greater Cape Town than in Johannesburg and V&A Waterfront restaurants. The difference in price between restaurants in greater Cape Town and those in Johannesburg was marginal.

The average price of a 300g grilled crayfish dish in Johannesburg was about R194, while in greater Cape Town, the same dish would cost R198. At the V&A Waterfront, the average cost would be R164.

Dessert prices were virtually the same at all restaurants surveyed.

As importantly, on the lower price band measure for all the restaurants measured, the following applied across the board for main courses, although differences were mostly marginal:

- Cheapest crayfish - Waterfront
- Cheapest vegetarian meal - Waterfront
- Cheapest chicken meal - Waterfront
- Cheapest duck meal - Johannesburg
- Cheapest ostrich - Waterfront
- Cheapest game - Johannesburg

For those interested in beverages, the cheapest bottle of Castle Lager was found in one of the restaurants surveyed in Cape Town (R7) and the most expensive in Johannesburg (R17).

The research was conducted by an empowerment research company, Roots Research SA, which is based in Cape Town.

Neil Markovitz, who heads Fedhasa in the Western Cape, says the onus should be on the consumer to ask the price for items that are marked SQ, to prevent any nasty surprises when they receive the bill.

"The pricing debate raging in Cape Town began with a story on a starter portion of perlemoen. The incident was not adequately researched with the facts somewhat sensationalized in the media. This spiralled into a major debate which painted the entire industry with the same brush."

Maureen Thomson, spokesperson for the V&A Waterfront, said they believed it was necessary to commission an independent survey into the issue of over-pricing in order to refute claims made against the V&A Waterfront

"As the results have proved, food prices at the V&A Waterfront are competitive with - and sometimes even better than - those in restaurants of the same calibre in greater Cape Town and Johannesburg. Game showed the greatest difference in price, with transport costs possibly contributing to the cost overall. We would hope that patrons would be mindful of charges before they order meals.

"We are pleased these independent results show that on average, but with some exceptions, there are no material differences between the V&A Waterfront and greater Cape Town, and in most cases, our top restaurants are cost competitive with their Johannesburg counterparts.

"However, we will continue to monitor pricing and where complaints are received, communicate these to our tenants."

The 60 restaurants surveyed in the V&A Waterfront, greater Cape Town and Johannesburg were:

V&A WATERFRONT

- Emily's
- Baia
- Belthazar
- Den Anker
- Green Dolphin
- Hildebrand
- Morton's on the Wharf
- One.Waterfront
- The Atlantic
- Waterfront Café
- Balducci
- City Grill
- Greek Fisherman
- Quay Four
- Societi Bistro
- Willoughby & Co
- Docks
- Harries Pancakes
- Paulaner
- Café San Marco

GREATER CAPE TOWN

- Buitenverwachting
- Vilamoura
- Bayside Café
- 0932
- Catharina's at Steenberg
- Mama Roma
- Beluga
- Blues
- Spaanschemaacht River Café
- Mount Nelson
- Andiamo
- Barristers
- Wharfside Grill
- Dunes
- Café Paradiso
- Codfather
- Peddlars on the Bend
- JB Rivers
- Forresters Arms
- La Scala

JOHANNESBURG

- Giles
- Mastrantonio's
- Yum
- Café Flo
- Georges on Fourth
- Anno Domini
- The Saxon
- Browns of Rivonia
- The Butcher Shop
- Papa's

JOHANNESBURG

- Rhubarb Gourmet
- Bukhara
- Piccolo Mondo
- Montego Bay
- Gazebo Coffee Shop
- Willoughby & Co
- Charlotte's Salon
- La Belle Terrasse
- Back of the Moon
- Blues Room