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Ready, set, dine!

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So many restaurants to choose from, so little time.

That's the dilemma facing many diners for the next 10 days as the semi-annual Queen's Feast Charlotte Restaurant Week kicks off Friday. The event celebrates its fifth year with 111 upscale eateries participating. Each offers a three-course dinner menu for \$30, not including tax and gratuity.

Navigating venues, multiple courses and extra-special bargains need not be daunting. Consider these tips for making the most of the experience.

Research and plan ahead

Advance research for deals and menu review is a must. The site, www.charlotterestaurantweek.com, lists restaurants by geography and alphabetically, and offers detailed descriptions of the menu choices. "Make reservations early, as many restaurants sell out," says Bruce Hensley, co-founder of Charlotte Restaurant Week.

Some restaurants are offering additional courses for the same fixed menu price or upgrades for a nominal extra charge. Additionally, some restaurants are offering AAA members an opportunity to purchase a \$50 gift certificate for a return visit for only \$25.

Note that some restaurants may not honor coupons during Queen's Feast.

Experiment with something new

Many diners find this event is a great opportunity to explore new-to-them establishments, types of cuisine (Indian curry, anyone?) and even neighborhoods. Remember, your very favorite restaurant was once new to you.

- Queen's Feast Charlotte Restaurant Week

More than 100 local restaurants offer three courses (or more) at dinner for only \$30 per person (not including tax and gratuity), Friday through July 28. Reservations are recommended. Details:

www.charlotterestaurantweek.com.

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“Last year’s Queen’s Feast introduced e2 to many people who were eager to experience chef Emeril Lagasse’s restaurant in Charlotte, and we anticipate a lot of new faces this time, too,” says Jeff Wakem, general manager of e2 emeril’s eatery in uptown. “It’s a great chance for people to experience restaurants they’ve been anxious to try but haven’t yet experienced.”

Don’t be afraid to upgrade

In the face of a great value, savvy diners often order one or two extra items off the regular menu to enhance their meal.

Splurge on a bottle of wine; take advantage of an extra appetizer or dessert for the table. This is your time to be adventurous.

“Often, restaurants are preparing for volume, and some of the standouts that require more elaborate preparation may not be included,” said Keia Mastrianni, a local food writer and blogger. “Ask your server for some off-menu recommendations.”

Manage your expectations

In January, more than 130,000 meals were served during Queen’s Feast, according to Hensley. This event represents a very busy time for restaurants, and diners may find service times extended.

Veteran Queen’s Feast diners choose mid-week evenings for the least-crowded and most leisurely dining experiences.

Restaurants adjust staffing levels and manage accordingly, but patience, understanding and even a smile can go a long way in getting a harried server to take an extra moment to warm up your coffee.

And be sure to tip well. “I’ve been on the other side of that table,” Mastrianni says. “Twenty percent is the standard. Servers are hustling, especially during this week.”

Most of all, have fun and enjoy yourself – that’s what dining out is all about!



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