

Paper: Tulsa World (OK)

Title: Tulsa pit stop was well worth it for 'Road Food' team

Date: October 19, 2005

Jane and Michael Stern didn't plan to stop in Tulsa. But while they were passing through last week, on their way to one of their all-time favorites, Van's Pig Stand in Shawnee, they remembered a spot in Tulsa.

The **White River Fish Market** is a place their readers have long told them to try. But they couldn't help but be dubious. The couple, known for recommending local flavors, couldn't see anything local or flavorful about eating fish in middle America.

You may know the Sterns from their guest commentary on the NPR show, "The Splendid Table," from their column in *Gourmet* magazine or maybe from their "Road Food" books. For 25 years, the Sterns have traveled the U.S., reviewing road food restaurants, which the Sterns describe as "sleeves-up food made by cooks, bakers, pitmasters and sandwich-makers -- almost always informal and inexpensive."

The **White River Fish Market**, 1708 N. Sheridan Road, fits that description perfectly. But a fish place in Oklahoma? Despite their apprehension, the Sterns thought they would give it a try. It's a good thing because they may have found their new favorite Oklahoma restaurant, or at least one on par with their beloved Van's.

"It's our kind of place. There's something about it -- it's to the point, there's no BS. It's just a wonderful experience, and just the kind of place I love to recommend to people," Michael Stern said.

The Sterns had a dinner of gumbo, red beans and rice, hushpuppies, fried catfish and lobster tail. And after enjoying every bite, they decided to break their own "local flavor" rule.

"If someone asked me, 'What would you eat in Oklahoma?' I would tell them, eat a steak or a great hamburger. That's the irony. Now, I'll say, 'If you go to Tulsa, you have to get to White River,'" Stern said. "For Jane and me, our song and dance always is, if you're in Kansas don't try the fish. If you're in Connecticut, don't try the barbecue."

And even though the **White River Fish Market** breaks the rule, the Sterns typically recommend trying regional, American foods while traveling. Michael Stern said American food is more appreciated now than it was when he began reviewing restaurants in the 1970s. The idea of American food being classless and including only hot dogs and hamburgers has changed.

On the other hand, Stern said an appreciation for gourmet food has given some people a disdain for road food.

"In my opinion, I don't know what it is, but I frankly do not have the patience to sit down for a 2 1/2 hour meal with wine paired with every dish. Sometimes, there's no question the food is delicious. But my last meal would not be a pate de foie gras, it would be a fabulous cheeseburger or barbecue ribs," Stern said. "For me, it's not about the fact that road food is less expensive, it's because it's better."

And finding those places in your own back yard is the best.

When the Sterns recently asked their newsletter readers, "Where should we eat in Oklahoma?" there were plenty of responses. The Sterns were glad they chose **White River Fish Market** this time. But they will be armed with more recommendations -- Cancun, Albert G's and Ron's, to name a few -- for the next time they pass through town.