

FEATURED IN THE:

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RENAISSANCE CAFÉ

Fine dining in Assaria's former schoolhouse.

A century-old high school gym is one of the last places you'd imagine for fine dining. After all, any mention of "high school" and "food" in the same sentence is more likely to conjure up images of hairnet-clad workers serving up scoops of mystery meat. But in the town of Assaria, population 467, the Renaissance Café (210 N. Center, Assaria; 785-667-5535, 785-822-6750) defies expectations. The original Assaria High School was built in 1919 and housed students for six decades before moving to a new building in 1978. Now, it houses a fancy eatery in the former gym. "It's impossible to imagine," says Kevin O'Brien, the restaurant's manager and head chef. "You just have to see it to believe it."

The restaurant is built around what locals call "The Pit," a sunken gym that offers a place for locals to play basketball, billiards, ping pong, shuffleboard and volleyball during lunchtime. Patrons come in on weekdays to blow off steam and grab a bite to eat. During lunch, the restaurant is a typical café with daily specials like roast beef and

chicken fried steak. But at night, the Renaissance transforms into a fine Italian restaurant with linen napkins and mouth-watering entrees. "It's really two completely different operations," says O'Brien. The experiences are like night and day.

Today, people from as far as Kansas City drive to the Renaissance for fine dining when it's open on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays from 5 to 9 p.m. (Reservations are a must.) The menu consists of pastas, salmon, steaks, trout, eggplant and more. The best-selling dish is the Steak Venato, a 10-ounce choice ribeye that's grilled to perfection and flamed with cognac. The sauce includes shallots, mushrooms and brown spicy mustard. For dessert, by far the most popular indulgence is the dark chocolate bread pudding with bourbon and cream sauce. "Everything is made from scratch," says O'Brien. "We're doing something that nobody else around here does." As a result, the Renaissance is schooling the competition. —J.M.



>> Trout mustrada at Renaissance Café

EXPERIENCE... The photos that hang on the walls. There's an impressive collection that ranges from antique opera posters to black and white photos of historic figures. "We've posted almost every historic figure you could possibly imagine," says O'Brien. Patrons often examine the pictures while they wait and remark on familiar faces. Coupled with the century-old building, the photos make the dining experience seem like a step back in time.

IF YOU STAY... Check out Rolling Hills Refuge, just west of nearby Salina on I-70. The zoo has 85 species of wildlife, including an Indian rhino, cheetahs and orangutans. Inside the museum, you can see animatronic robots and scenes from the Great Wall of China, a rainforest and an African watering hole.

JUST NORTH Cozy Inn in Salina

Any time you're passing through Salina, grab a bag of burgers from the Cozy Inn. The small, juicy delights—priced at 79 cents apiece—are packed with onions and cooked on the restaurant's original cast-iron grill. It's like White Castle—but better. Open 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday through Saturday. (108 N. 7th St., 785-825-2699)