

Gigi's, The Spirit of Sophisticated Lafayette on Your Plate

By Sophie Braccini

Getting a table at Gigi's for dinner, even just for two, requires some planning ahead. When I called on a Friday afternoon for a table that same evening, nothing was available until 9:00 pm. But my date and I were hungry and decided to head over at 8:15, just in case.

I used to know the small cottage on Brown in Lafayette as the home of a quaint European place. That rainy evening, the atmosphere was quite different. Owner Jeff Amber remodeled it in a simple, modern and elegant way. The young chef moved to Lafayette from San Francisco four years ago, looking for a great place to raise his family. He had run Moose's and XYZ in San Francisco as well as the three Chow's. He started working in restaurants at age fourteen, working his way up the ladder.

When we arrived, the main rooms and small covered terrace were full with a baby boomer crowd. We sat at the bar, a bit crunched in the hallway, waiting for a table to open. We were offered a very interesting choice of drinks. I had a glass of Macon Vil-

lage and my companion a Californian beer. The wine and beer list is extensive and diverse. As Jeff Amber explained later "for beer, we look for local small breweries, the wines are more international and the French and Italian we have are lighter, affordable and



go well with our food." As we waited for a table, we could observe part of the kitchen where Amber works side by side with chef Sebastian Miller.

A table first became available for us on the covered terrace, but the atmosphere there was a bit to cold and isolated. We moved to one of the main rooms for a warmer feel. The servers were quite busy, but very amicable and took our every request with the best disposition. The menu is sea-

sonal and claims use of local ingredients. I started with figs stuffed with goat cheese on a baby arugula salad with fennel. The taste of the salad was much milder and more subtle than the usual arugula. I later learned that it was harvested very young and mixed with watercress. Amber buys it

from Sausalito Springs, a local Bay Area organic farmer. My companion had roasted chicken liver with green apple and arugula.

The livers had a pleasant distinctive scent that came from a mix of herbs and spices including dried celery seeds and a "secret ingredient" from the south called old bay; the greens were extremely tender and tasty.

My main dish was cod with butternut squash. The fish was perfectly cooked and the vegetables were just the right combination. My companion chose pork tenderloin that was served with small vegetables and faro. The taste of the sauce was refined and savory; we asked the composition and were answered that it was a

beef and red wine reduction that incorporated some 20 other ingredients, including apple cider and maple syrup.

The restaurant places an emphasis on treating seasonal vegetables as an important focus of the dishes. Amber confirms, "I get my inspiration from seasonal local ingredients. For example we are now serving a roasted coings salad with honey vinaigrette. This is a fruit that is often overlooked but gives great results." Another key element is the research of interesting flavors without the need for overstatement. "Yes," says Amber, "we make everything but the bread and we try to keep our cooking elegant and simple."

We were quite satiated after the entrees, but couldn't ignore the dessert menu. We gave in to poached pears with vanilla mascarpone and a perfect butterscotch crème brulee with shortbread cookies. The total price, with gratuities, drinks and dessert came to \$100 for two. As the evening came to a close, Amber worked the room and greeted all of the diners to make sure everyone had enjoyed their visit to Gigi's, one of the most interesting dinner experiences in Lamorinda.

Gigi's, 1005 Brown Ave., Lafayette 962-0882



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