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A Window to the World in Lafayette

By Susie Iventosch



La Finestra chef-owner Jeff Assadi, right, and waiter Tony Lavino, left Photo Susie Iventosch

My husband and I took his dad out to La Finestra last week, to celebrate his birthday. We chose this particular restaurant due to its close proximity and terrific reputation. And more importantly, the birthday boy has always enjoyed its food and charming location, nestled amongst giant eucalyptus trees on Lafayette Circle.

The experience certainly lived up to our expectations and the fun-loving waiter, Tony Lavino, was excellent, too. He covered that restaurant like nobody's business, serving up meal after delicious meal with impeccable timing.

Chef-owner, Jeff Assadi, is just about the nicest restaurant chef I've ever met. His love of cooking is evident in the quality, taste and presentation of his cuisine, but he is also a most gracious and inviting host.

Now, I am not a restaurant critic by trade, but I am a professional talker, and I really enjoyed getting to know Chef Jeff better the following day. He took me on a tour of his restaurant, starting with the front of the house, then onto the quaint upstairs banquet room, and finally into the kitchen, where he prepared his fabulous "Polenta alla Contadina" just for me!

This grilled polenta appetizer is served with a robust sauce of wild mushrooms, sun dried tomatoes, garlic, parsley and cream, finished with a sprinkling of Parmesan cheese. Jeff not only shared the recipe, but he showed me exactly how to replicate it at home. As a polenta lover from way back, this made me very happy! He said he'd show me his recipe for lamb shanks on another day. Sounds great to me.

As Jeff described his love of cooking, he told me that every dish (with the exception of lasagna, cannelloni and lamb shanks) is made to order - every single serving, including his minestrone and porcini soups! With a small restaurant, he is able to put his heart into every meal. Though he has a bachelor's degree in engineering, cooking is his passion and it really shows.

For 16 years, Jeff worked for Faz Restaurants overseeing new restaurant openings and operations. This work inspired him to own a restaurant himself one day, so when La Finestra founder Andrea Ditta was looking for a buyer in 2003, it didn't take Jeff long to sign up!

"Faz Poursohi is still a really good friend and I learned so much from him and all of his chefs over the years," he said. "But I am so happy here, cooking for my customers in my own restaurant. I really enjoy it."

In 2005, Jeff took a mini-sabbatical to Italy with his family.

"I visited both the front and the back of the house in many restaurants in Florence and Venice," he noted. "It was a great way to learn about the Italian menus and to see how they operate in their kitchens."

While there, he took a series of photographs with a focus on "windows" since La Finestra means "the window" in Italian. Although Jeff claims to be an amateur photographer, patrons will be impressed with his gallery of Italian windows adorning the restaurant!

La Finestra is available for private parties and event catering in addition to regular dining hours.

Please visit

www.lafinestraristorante.com

for menus and information

100 Lafayette Circle, Lafayette, (925) 284-5282

Lunch Hours: Tue. thru Fri.

11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Dinner Hours

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday 5 to 9 p.m.

Friday and Saturday 5 to 10 p.m.



Photo Susie Iventosch

RECIPE

Polenta alla Contadina

(Serves 4)

Note -- Jeff does not use exact measuring cup-type measurements. He cooks more by feel, tossing in a handful of this and a pinch of that ... and the result is fabulous. I've tried to use measurements here, for our readers, but if you wish to taste the recipe exactly as he cooks it, it is really best to take a night on the town and dine at La Finestra!

Polenta

1 cup polenta (enriched cornmeal)

3 cups water

¼ cup heavy cream

1 tablespoon crumbled "sweet" gorgonzola cheese

(gorgonzola aged approximately 3 months)

Pinch salt and pepper

Heat water to boiling, add cream and gorgonzola cheese. Slowly add polenta, stirring or whisking all the while. Reduce heat to low and continue to cook for 30 to 40 minutes, stirring often. When very thick, turn into greased dish, such as a bread pan, until set. Chill until ready to use. Then slice into ¾ inch slices, approximately 3 inches square. Set aside, or refrigerate until ready to use.

Wild Mushroom Sauce

1-2 tablespoons oil

(7/8 canola oil, and 1/8 olive oil)

3 cups mushrooms, thinly sliced (combination of fresh shitake and oyster mushrooms and a little bit of dried porcini)

1-2 cloves garlic, pressed

¼-1/3 cup julienned sun dried tomatoes, packed in oil, drained

¼ cup fresh parsley, chopped

Salt and pepper to taste

½ -3/4 cup heavy cream (this is a guess ... adjust as you see fit for your family!)

Preheat a frying pan to very hot. Add oil, then garlic and mushrooms. Cook until mushrooms begin to brown, stirring or tossing occasionally. Add sun dried tomatoes,

heat and toss together. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Add parsley and cream.

Cook until just until slightly thickened.

Spoon over grilled polenta and garnish with freshly grated Parmesan cheese.

Serve immediately.

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