

Rustic Tavern

By Susie Iventosch



Photo provided

My father-in-law and I finally had the chance to visit Lafayette's Rustic Tavern for dinner a few weeks ago. We enjoyed a fantastic meal and excellent service in the outdoor seating area, and though we were a little skeptical about the cool weather that June evening, the outdoor heaters provided plenty of warmth.

The menu is concise, with just six entrees, but I was happy to see Papa's favorite pasta dish on the menu, a Rustic Tavern version of carbonara. It was different than most pasta carbonara dishes I've seen, because they served a poached egg on top, rather than stirring beaten eggs into the hot pasta after cooking. It was obviously made with wonderful homemade fettucine, which reminded me exactly of the noodles my great Aunt Clara used to make, whenever she babysat my siblings and me. Nostalgia!

I selected the Skuna Bay Salmon, which was nothing short of fabulous and served with a yummy artichoke hash, made with carrots and onions. It was so good that I went home to attempt it myself. Apparently, I didn't detect all of the secret ingredients, because mine was not nearly as good. We also shared the Lacinto Kale Salad, made with kale, currants, farro, tangerine, pine nuts and feta cheese. This salad was fantastic!

Rustic Tavern is owned and operated by Chris Amsden and Tressa and Gary Rust, all friends from their days of working together at Lark Creek in the late '90s and early 2000s. Though they all left Lark Creek to pursue other ventures, they longed to team up again one day to form their own restaurant. On April 30, they opened the tavern doors and have been very busy serving customers ever since!

While Amsden and Tressa Rust run the front of the house, including the bar and wait staff, Chef Gary Rust

heads up the kitchen and menu planning. He employs the "farm to table" philosophy, ordering fresh meats, fish and produce daily. He also tends his own garden, which supplies much of the produce served in the restaurant as well as the honey and herbs that go into the menu.

"Gary buys whole fish and filets them himself," Amsden said. "During crab season, he has a team of people picking fresh crab for our crab cakes."

The trio describes their menu as "Seasonal American Fare" and they have purposely kept the menu small so as to focus on the quality of every dish. Recently, they've offered several well-received luncheon and dinner specials, and they plan to vary the menu according to seasonally available ingredients.

Like any venture, it takes some time to iron out the wrinkles, and it appears to be no different for Rustic Tavern. One of our Lamorinda Weekly editors has had the opportunity to dine here a couple of times, and though she said the first time was a little rough in terms of the service as well as the meal she ordered, she visited a second time and was delighted with the results. She found her meal to be very good and the service great.

On the subject of working out kinks, Papa and I chose to dine outside, because the noise level is fairly high indoors making conversation a bit difficult. But Amsden says they are aware of the issue and are working on plans to improve the acoustics, soon.

Amsden and the Rusts are very pleased with the support the Lamorinda community has shown for their new establishment.

"It has been wonderful to have such a positive turnout of guests so far," Amsden remarked. "We look forward to continuing to make long-lasting friendships for many years, so thank you to all!"

Rustic Tavern's Mason Jar Mascarpone Cheesecake

Pastry Chef Nicolette Selvig was kind enough to share her recipe for her mascarpone cheesecake, which she says is "the world's most labor-intensive cheesecake!"

Yield: 12 half-pint mason jars

Time: 1.5 hours

INGREDIENTS

1 lb. cream cheese
10.5 oz mascarpone
5 oz creme fraiche
8 oz sugar
4 large eggs
7 egg yolks
1 teaspoon lemon juice
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Note from Pastry Chef Nicolette Selvig: At the restaurant we like to use what is fresh and available. We make our own creme fraiche, but if we are in between batches I always substitute sour cream. This recipe is great for entertaining and can be topped with fresh fruit or jam.

Nicole also tops the cheesecake with a quinoa granola to give a texture somewhat like a graham cracker crust, but allows those with gluten allergies to partake!

Note from Susie: I made this recipe and the flavor was amazing, but because I was away from my own kitchen and all I had was a hand-held beater, I think I fell into the trap of allowing too much air into the batter. My cheesecake turned out just a little bit grainier and less smooth and creamy than I would have liked, as it seemed to 'souffle' rather than bake into a custard. Now, I am anxious to try it at the restaurant, so I can see how it is supposed to turn out!

DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. It is very important that all of your ingredients are at room temperature (around 65 degrees) including eggs and lemon juice.
2. Remove lids from jars and place jars in an oven proof baking dish with sides at least two inches high.
3. Put the cream cheese and sugar in the mixing bowl of a Kitchenaid mixer with the paddle attachment. Turn to low speed stopping the mixer occasionally to scrape the sides of the bowl with a rubber spatula.
4. Continue mixing on low until most of the lumps are out of the cream cheese. Do not turn mixer up because it will incorporate air and the cheesecake will souffle in the oven.
5. Add the mascarpone and mix on low to incorporate.
6. Scrape the bowl again and add the creme fraiche, lemon juice, and vanilla. Mix on low.
7. Combine the eggs and egg yolks and add to the mixer in three additions scraping the bowl in between each one.
8. Strain your batter through a fine mesh sieve to remove any remaining chunks of cream cheese. It should be of pourable consistency.
9. Ladle the batter into the mason jars leaving a half inch to an inch of space from the top.
10. Wipe the rims of the jars where any batter might have spilled.
11. Place the baking dish in the oven then, using a pitcher fill around the jars until the water reaches halfway up the baking dish. I fill my water baths in the oven so I don't have to carry it to the oven full of water and risk splashing some in the cheesecake.
12. Seal tinfoil tightly around the baking dish and bake for 35 minutes. Do not rotate.
13. They should be slightly more firm around the edges and softer in the middle. When you tap the side of the jar, if the whole surface is loose it may need a couple more minutes. The cheesecakes are a custard so when you pull them out of the oven they will be VERY loose. This is perfect.
14. Immediately remove cheesecakes from the water and place in the refrigerator to chill. I do this by covering my hand with a towel. Oven mitts are too large and I have dropped more jars than not trying to use them.
15. Chill uncovered for two hours then store covered for up to two days.

**If your cheesecakes shrank at all around the edges after chilling they were a little bit over baked.*

Rustic Tavern

3576 Mt. Diablo Blvd.,
Lafayette
www.rustictavernlafayette.com
(925) 385-0559

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http://www.skunasalmon.com

Susie Iventosch is the author of Tax Bites and Tasty Morsels, which can be found at Across the Way in Moraga, www.amazon.com, and www.taxbites.net. Susie can be reached at suziventosch@gmail.com.

This recipe can be found on our website: www.lamorindaweekly.com.

If you would like to share your favorite recipe with Susie please contact her by email or call our office at (925) 377-0977.



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