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American Kitchen Opens in Lafayette

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Chef Allan Rivera and Victor Ivry in front of their new Lafayette restaurant, American Kitchen. Photo Sohie Braccini

American Kitchen is Victor Ivry's new baby. The Orinda resident, sports coach and commercial real estate professional, who entered the restaurant business four years ago with the opening of Table 24, and later Barbacoa, in Theatre Square with partner Michael Karp, recently opened American Kitchen in Lafayette. Ivry has a new partner in this venture, eclectic chef Allan Rivera, and is taking full advantage of the completely renovated 80-year-old cottage, and its shaded grounds, on Lafayette Circle. American Kitchen brings distinctive dishes and flavors gathered from across the United States, contrasting with the prevalent California vibe of the burgeoning food mecca.

The charming and relaxed atmosphere quickly drew curious patrons and Rivera started sending out the food he loves - a mix of traditional regional foods from the Deep South, the mid-Atlantic, Midwest and Northeast. As Rivera puts it, he pulls from the whole breadth of American comfort food.

In college Rivera studied philosophy and pre-law, but after graduating he decided that law school wasn't for him and instead traveled the country to find himself. He always had a love of cooking, born in the family kitchen that mixed Italian and Puerto Rican origins with the flavors of New York. When presented with the opportunity to start a restaurant in Hawaii, he jumped at the chance and hasn't stopped cooking since.

Watching him at work in his kitchen, it seems clear that he has found his calling. A gourmet who enjoys the good things in life, he likes to experiment and try new twists on old favorites. We found Rivera and his team creating a new brine and spice mix for the brisket that will become the house pastrami, and preparing house-smoked salmon.

American Kitchen began serving breakfast and lunch on Aug. 25, and added dinner hours a few days later. "We are starting with a dinner menu that pulls some elements from the lunch menu. With a new restaurant, you want to do things and you want to do them well, before you expand," explains Rivera. "As the teams get trained and patrons' preferences become clear, we will modify the menu to follow our clients' inclination."

Appetizers include deep fried sweet pickles and quick-roasted olives; among the entrées are pastrami on rye, a "true cod" slider with fennel slaw, burgers, salads, and homemade chorizo that adds a delicious, smoky flavor to a mussels and frites dish that's bound to become a favorite. "We make our own chorizo and we will brine our own sauerkraut," says Rivera. Since everything is made right there, Rivera can cater to different dietary needs from vegetarian to gluten or dairy free. "You just have to ask," he says.

Sitting on the patio after a lunch service, Ivry enjoys a moment's respite before debriefing with the team and talking finance with the local investors who have helped him manifest his dream. "This is the best patio in town," he says. Although he retains part-ownership of Barbacoa and Table 24, Ivry is thrilled to be creating something new and exciting. "We work very hard here, but this is

casual and comfortable," says the man who has a reputation for asking 110 percent from his crew.

"I love the excitement of the day-to-day, and everyday is an opportunity to win people over," says Ivry, who concludes with something his mother told him when he opened Table 24. "You won't be judged by who comes to your restaurant, you will be judged by who returns to your restaurant." Ivry is sure that with great food, great service and a beautiful, intimate location, he has the winning formula that will make people want to come back over and over again.

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