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Local restaurants optimize the outdoors

By Pippa Fisher



Outdoor diners enjoy the summer sun at Batch and Brine in Lafayette. Photo Andy Scheck

Making the most of the area's beautiful climate by offering outside dining is nothing new - in fact these days it's an almost obligatory trend along restaurant row. But Lafayette's latest eatery Batch and Brine has really embraced it. And they are getting it right.

In fact there is a deliberate continuation of outside brought inside, thanks to the restaurant's tall, fold-back windows that open up the interior for an airy feel. The outdoor walls are a mixture of reclaimed wood and "living" walls, planted with succulents. The patio wraps around the building and features a fire pit with lounge seating. There is a counter facing the street for those who enjoy people-watching.

"There isn't a bad seat in the house," says co-owner Celina Gonzales, explaining that the design was planned to allow maximum visibility across the entire restaurant, both inside and out, to encourage a community feel. Gonzales draws attention to the low booths and open, curved walls, which she notes were all

part of the vision.

The ambience is upscale "cool." More Oakland than traditional burbs, and that, says Gonzales, is a hit with the changing demographic of Lafayette. She says she loves to see families coming in with their kids on scooters. But it's not just young families - the restaurant is attracting a mix from young professionals to older groups. She says the community has been very supportive and excited about this new venture. Watching recent Warriors' games on the big screen TV and now the World Cup is are examples of the community feeling the place fosters.

Batch and Brine, which moved into the old Swaad Indian restaurant location and knocked through into what used to be a knitting shop, had its official opening at the beginning of June.

The hipster vibe is evident from the custom-painted murals by Berk Visual - also responsible for menu design, coasters, T-shirts and even the eye-catching bathroom stall graffiti-style décor. The interior design by Crome Architecture is modern and sleek.

The restaurant is family-owned by siblings Mike, Rolla, and David Ghaben together with their cousins Sam Ghaben and Celina Gonzales and their son Victor Ghaben. This ain't their first rodeo. Together this family brings many years of restaurant experience to the venture, coming from their family restaurants La Ultima of Oakland, Danville and Walnut Creek and Hof Brau and Hubcaps of Walnut Creek. They now have three generations of owner-operator experience, overseeing multiple East Bay locations of Black Bear Diner, Mel's Diner and two Broderick Roadhouse locations.

It's quite a pedigree and it all started with patriarch Zafer Ghaben. "My father is the rock of the family," acknowledges Rolla Ghaben, attributing everything they have learned of guest relations to him.

Many of the recipes, such as the falafel and kufta burgers on the menu are family recipes handed down from Zafer Ghaben who, although now retired at 82, still comes by the restaurant and heads straight for the kitchen.

The name Batch and Brine represents the small batch beers, wines and spirits on the menu and the family's culinary techniques.

The food itself reflects the blend of the family's Mediterranean and New Mexican heritage with bold flavors and locally sourced, seasonal produce. Rolla Ghaben, whose favorite is the kafta burger, points out that the house-made pastrami involves a 13-day brining process.

Not surprisingly, the family brought in a world-class chef to lead the operation - Executive Chef David Suarez who trained under Chef Thomas Keller in New York. The result is surprisingly excellent food, from Victor Ghaben's hatch chile burger to Suarez' steak au poivre burger. Must-trys on the menu include the duck and cheese fries.

All the food is beautifully presented; no detail overlooked. "Food is art," says Rolla Ghaben simply.

The restaurant offers a brunch menu on Saturdays and Sundays featuring several different Benedict-style egg dishes and an interesting-sounding PBJ stuffed French toast dish.

The drink menu has an extensive cocktail list, a wine selection of small-production artisanal wines and 20 craft beers on tap. At the helm of the bar is mixologist Casey Carr. His passion is creating craft cocktails and perfecting flavors. He comes to Batch and Brine via such restaurants as The Cooperage.

Batch and Brine is open everyday from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Brunch is served on Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Go to <https://batchandbrine.com/> for more details.

With reasonable prices, and its edgy, fun ambience this restaurant is sure to become a favorite.

Reach the reporter at: pippa@lamorindaweekly.com

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