



Taste of California

by Judy Kneiszel

The people who drive an hour or more to dine at Taste in Plymouth, California, often ask the owners why their restaurant is in the middle of nowhere.

"We tell them we're not in the middle of nowhere; we're in the center of everything," says Tracey Berkner who co-owns Taste with her chef husband Mark. "We like living near the

mountains and we like having a restaurant here.”

Plymouth is an Amador County town of about 1,000 people, located in the Sierra Nevada foothills. And despite being about an hour east of Sacramento, word is apparently getting out as Taste was rated “#1 Restaurant in Sacramento Region” and awarded 29 out of 30 points for its cuisine in the latest “Zagat: America’s Top Restaurants,” guidebook, a score matched by only four other restaurants in the Sacramento area.

“The Zagat rating was a huge surprise,” says Tracey. “We were one of 30 restaurants in America with a food score of 29. It’s amazing that five of the 30 were in Sacramento — the highest concentration of top scores. We are thrilled about the accolades and working hard to keep earning that 29 rating. Business has really taken off.”

Taste, now a beautiful fine dining restaurant, was built in 1914 as a bar, sold soda and candy during prohibition, became a “sportsman’s club” in the early 1940s and then fell into disrepair in the late ‘90s.

The Berkners, both former Marriott employees, saw the single-story wooden frame building as a diamond in the rough, and began refurbishing it in 2005. The bar alone took four months to refinish, Tracey says. And there was no kitchen at all in the building when they bought it. What is now the kitchen and back dining room had been a two-bedroom apartment. The beautiful built-in buffet in the back dining room is original.

Gas Equipment Ensures Good Taste

The renovations at Taste involved designing and equipping a kitchen, which ended up being



Diners enjoy Saturday lunch in the bright, front dining room of Taste restaurant in Plymouth, California. With 50 wineries within a 30-minute drive, area visitors who enjoy both fine food and local wine are frequent guests of Taste.

about half the total 3,000 square feet of the entire restaurant. On a busy night, as many as six cooks staff the well-equipped gas kitchen.

“All of our beef, chicken, and mushroom stocks are made from scratch,” Tracey says. “The beef and chicken are roasted in the gas ovens, and then the stocks are finished by simmering them over a low gas flame. It takes a couple of hours to make good stock.”

While the menu at Taste is constantly changing, there is one item the 56-seat restaurant is known for. The Mushroom Cigars have been on the menu since the doors of Taste opened to guests in 2006 and will never be removed. These delicacies, available as a “Small Taste” for \$5 on the Saturday lunch menu or as a slightly larger, but still “Small Taste” on the nightly menu for \$9.50 are made with crimini, shitake, and oyster mushrooms along with fresh herbs and goat cheese wrapped in phyllo dough.

The “cigars” are baked in a gas convection oven. Then, right before serving, they are crisped on a hot flat top gas griddle.

“They are crispy on the outside and flaky and tender on the inside,” Tracey says. “People love them.”



Mark and Tracey Berkner, the owners of Taste in the small town of Plymouth, California, bought a run-down bar built in 1914 and restored the single-story wood frame building into a beautiful 56-seat fine dining restaurant with white tablecloths and rich, warm woodwork. It has become a destination restaurant for dining enthusiasts who drive an hour or more from Davis, Alameda, Sacramento and San Francisco.

Fresh, Local Taste

People also love the soup at Taste, which changes seasonally – not nightly. The soup in autumn was a roasted eggplant with lemon curry, chive oils, and a goat cheese red pepper croquette.

“We make one seasonal soup at a time,” Tracey says. “Mark doesn’t believe soup should be an afterthought or a way to use leftovers.”

Mark also believes chicken is not a menu requirement.

“We don’t serve chicken,” Tracey says. “When we opened, Mark said, ‘chicken is ordinary. I want to challenge myself.’”

So instead of chicken, Taste offers poultry dishes like “Grilled Local Guinea Hen” with fresh grape pistachio salad, wild rice, goat feta timbale and local wine grape puree for \$27. Another chicken alternative on the fall menu was Grimaud Farms Duck Breast with pepita mole, tomatillo polenta and pumpkin cilantro salad for \$28.

Grimaud Farms is a California producer of specialty poultry, just one of many local producers the Berkners procure ingredients from. Their polenta comes from a local producer who grows and grinds a variety of grains.

We work with a lot of local producers from an organic farm up the road to small producers who just come to the back door with produce,” Tracey says. “The figs we use are grown nearby, and we save our vegetable and grain scraps for our local egg producer who feeds them to her 200 chickens.”

The eggs are used in the Taste Sandwich, a staple on the Saturday lunch menu, consisting of sautéed mushrooms, grilled rib steak, Dijon, a local fried egg and grilled bread, priced at \$15.

We’re known for making really fresh seasonal food that’s really good – that’s what’s exciting for us,” Tracey says. “It’s nothing terribly crazy. We just ask, ‘how can we make these local ingredients taste best?’”

Taste

Natural Gas Equipment

- 1 - Jade Grill and Flat Top
- 1 - Montague Double Stack Convection Oven
- 1 - Montague Salamander
- 1 - Vulcan Flat Top with 2 Stock Burners
- 1 - Wolf 6 Burner Range with Single Oven



Taste's signature Mushroom Cigars are made with crimini, shitake and oyster mushrooms along with fresh herbs and goat cheese wrapped in phyllo dough.



The Taste kitchen sends out a dish that includes grilled pork, local figs, pecans and bleu cheese salad. A bowl of roasted eggplant soup with lemon curry, chive oils, and a goat cheese red pepper croquette also awaits delivery to the dining room.

Sharing Taste

The Berkners also operate the Volcano Union Inn, a four-room bed and breakfast with a pub in the nearby – and also tiny – town of Volcano, California. The Volcano Union Inn serves casual pub type fare. Tracey runs the front of the house at both places and Mark runs the kitchens. The Volcano Inn, she says, serves mainly locals, but Taste has become a destination restaurant for dining enthusiasts who drive an hour or more from Davis, Alameda, Sacramento and San Francisco.

The minute they pull the fork-shaped door handle, guests leave the small rural town behind and enter a sophisticated atmosphere with white linen tablecloths, warm burnt orange painted walls and rich woodwork. But Taste isn’t formal. Guests are welcome to create their own experience by picking and choosing from the menu however they like.

The menu, both at dinner and for Saturday lunch, has a “small taste” list on the left and a “large taste” list on the right. The menu changes often, but recent Saturday lunch offerings included “Frito Misto” crispy battered rock shrimp and seasonal vegetables with a saffron aioli in a small size for \$7, or a larger size with plenty to share for \$15.

“We encourage sharing,” Tracey says. “We don’t charge a split fee because we want people to get as many tastes as possible. When we’re talking to a table and offer to split something, guests begin having a fuller experience. And it can actually bring the check total up because often people want to pair wine with each dish they try.”

Wine With Taste

Tracey says there are about 50 wineries within a 30-minute drive from Taste, which helps the restaurant’s business immensely. Taste, she says, can turn a day of wine touring into a full culinary experience for area visitors. In fact, traffic from wine tours is the main reason the Berkners decided a little over a year ago to open Taste for lunch on Saturdays. Saturday dinner is often the culmination of a day spent visiting wineries in the area as well. And while Taste does take



One of the Taste chefs sautés an entrée in the restaurant’s busy gas-equipped kitchen. Transforming the old building into a fine dining restaurant involved designing and equipping a kitchen, which ended up being about half the total 3,000 square foot area of Taste restaurant. On a busy night, as many as six cooks staff the kitchen.

reservations for dinner to ensure people who travel a long distance actually get a table, there's always room for people who discover Taste while out touring wineries to dine at the bar without reservations.

"People who like wine like food," Tracey says. "It's a no brainer. The wineries send people here all the time. It's really a small community."

For people who enjoy pairing just the right wine with their food, Tracey can be of assistance. She is a member of the Guild of Master Sommeliers after passing the Level 1 examination, and Taste is a Wine Spectator Award of Excellence recipient for 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011. They carry wines from around the world as well as from California wineries. Taste's local wine selection allows guests to compare wines they might have sampled at different wineries side by side.

"We do a fun thing where we take three wines from wineries within five miles of each other and let people compare," Tracey says.

For people who purchase wine while touring and want to enjoy it with dinner at Taste, the restaurant charges a \$15 corkage fee. That fee is waived, however, on the second Thursday of every month, because even the most ardent food and wine enthusiasts appreciate a break once in awhile, especially in the current economy. And the Berkners are the first to admit the economy hasn't been the best since they opened Taste.

"The first year and a half was great, and we've held our own since then," Tracey says. "People want to spend money where they know they'll get a good experience, so that's what we try to bring them."

Taste

9402 Main Street
Plymouth, CA 95669

Phone: (209) 245-3463

Website: www.restauranttaste.com

Owners: Mark and Tracey Berkner

Hours of Operation: Lunch is served Saturday 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Dinner is served Thursday, Friday and Monday beginning at 5 p.m.
Saturday and Sunday dinner service begins at 4:30 p.m.

Seating capacity: 56

Concept: Fine dining

Cuisine: Contemporary California

Menu Sampling: Poached Local Pear Salad, Mushroom Cigars, Braised Beef Pirogi, Grilled California White Bass, Colorado Rack of Lamb, Grilled Local Guinea Hen

Average Check Per Person: Dinner: \$48;
Lunch: \$24

On the Road with *Cooking For Profit*

by Judy Kneiszel

Normally, due to the constraints of time and travel, I communicate with the owners of the restaurants I profile for "*Cooking For Profit*" via telephone and email. When I do travel however, whether for business or pleasure, I search out restaurants that would make great profiles. I enjoy talking with the owners personally, seeing restaurant décor with my own eyes, and yes, sampling the cuisine.

So, when I decided to tag along on my husband's business trip to California in October, the first thing I did was search for a restaurant in the area of his conference that was "cooking for profit." My search led me to Taste, in the small town of Plymouth, California.

While the owners of Taste, Tracey and Mark Berkner, are busy running not one, but two, Amador County, California restaurants, they were very accommodating to our schedule. I had a tour of the lovingly restored Taste and long talk with Tracey one day, and a wonderful Saturday lunch the next.

Probably the most enjoyable part of the visit for me was being able to introduce a somewhat "local" couple, Kit and Eleanor Rosefield, to Taste after they introduced my husband Jim and I to several area wineries. They live about an hour from Plymouth, which compared to our 2,200 miles, is nothing. The Rosefields, like most Californians it seems, have a keen appreciation for good food and wine, and I know they'll visit Taste again soon because of the culinary delights and warm hospitality we experienced there.

To me, that's really what this and every other profile I write for *Cooking For Profit* is about. It is my goal each month to introduce people to successful restaurateurs around the country, providing a little peek into what makes their operations prosper.



Judy Kneiszel, Profile Editor



Tracey Berkner, who co-owns Taste with her chef husband Mark, welcomes guests Eleanor and Kit Rosefield to the restaurant for Saturday lunch. The couple had spent the morning touring Amador County wineries.

THE SEAFOOD STEAMER

FAST The Groen HyPerSteam generator-driven unit delivers steam on demand for even the busiest seafood restaurants. A powerful inverted-flow convection fan provides increased steam distribution for even cooking throughout the chamber.

EFFICIENT Our dual water hook-up is standard, saving on water filtration, allowing unfiltered water to be used for the condensate drain. Filtered water is only needed for product steaming. And with our auto fill and drain, no more lugging water to and from the unit.

RELIABLE Our unique design allows for flexibility in the field with a field-reversible door, and a true hands-free a-la-carte-style handle.

THE HYPERSTEAM BY GROEN, WHEN IT'S ALL ABOUT THE *sea* FOOD.

unifiedbrands.net
888.994.7636

HyPerSteam by
groen

