

# Culinary Thymes

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## Celebrate America



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# Laurier Café and Wine Bar

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by Kathi Mosbacher

"PIGS GET FAT, HOGS GET SLAUGHTERED," WERE THE pearls of wisdom from Gary Fuller and Kelly Kimberly's accountant seven months ago when they opened Laurier Café and Wine Bar. While personally this husband-and-wife-team is lean as lampposts, the reservation book at their self-proclaimed "neighborhood joint," is bulging at the seams. Why? It's small, fresh as the gerbera daisy that graces each table, the food is very good, sometimes great, and everyone always seems to be having such a good time. (Some nights a little too good a time, if hearing is a problem.)

Clean, white angular lines and walls painted bold primary shades of lipstick red, Mediterranean blue, and sunflower yellow have transformed what was formerly Swifty's Barbecue into a totally relaxed, but distinctly urban setting that manages to feel happy and bright when the sun's shining and, with the help of cleverly strategic track lighting and candlelight, warm and sophisticated at night.

The menu falls into that vague current category of "New American bistro," which, in Laurier's case, successfully combines unfussy French cooking sensibilities with a short list of the best, most natural American products available. Fuller, who is also the executive chef, is importing Niman Ranch all-natural, preservative-free beef, pork and lamb from northern California, the best free-range chickens, also from California (where else?), and glorious local bounty from Airline Seafood, where he scores jumbo lump crabmeat for what I feel is Laurier's finest accomplishment—one of the city's best (and simplest) Crab Cakes.

Approached with almost Zen-like austerity, huge sweet chunks of crabmeat are bound simply with egg yolk (one yolk per pound, he says), fitted into a mold, coated with a thin veneer of fine Japanese breadcrumbs and sautéed in Plugra Butter. It arrives in a shallow, pleasantly acidic, pinkish pool of tomato-tinted beurre blanc and a random scattering of baby watercress. "They do exactly what they're supposed to do. They fall apart when touched by a fork!" was the ringing endorsement by a Washington D.C. native who knows her crab cakes.

The Pork Ribs, another hot starter, are almost stew-like, braised for six hours with tomatoes and a thick mirepoix, a combination of chopped carrots, onion and celery, until they fall from the bone. I found them even more interesting than the fiercely seasoned Pork Tenderloin entrée. There is a sort of Gumbo du jour with a darkly delicious, intentionally thin roux whose composition varies according to the contents of the kitchen. (The duck and andouille gumbo was superb one recent night when duck was the featured special.) The Soupe Pistou is a faithful recollection of a Provençal classic, chock full of bright vegetables in a heady broth with a garlicky pistou-laden croute. The salads are another fine way to start the meal (or a great choice for lunch). They are handsomely composed and perfectly executed with a vinaigrette worth remembering for future reference. (It is a reduction of balsamic vinegar sweetened with a little brown sugar).

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Two irregularly available specials to keep an eye out for are the simple, unadorned sautéed Soft-Shell Crabs and the double chop Racks of Lamb. The crabs will last as long as the season (and supply) does, and the lamb, currently offered as a weekend special, will return to the menu as the weather cools. The last order of the seriously drool-worthy double chops passed me one night on their way to another diner and I had to return another (weekend) night just to see if they were as good as they looked. (They were, but they needed some salt.) On a recent evening, I was surrounded by happy customers tucking into platefuls of Steak Frites, magnificent nearly two-inch thick dry-aged New York steaks grilled to a juicy turn and piled high with a conical heap of highly addictive skins-on pommes frites. (A little béarnaise, and I would have been delirious!) The plate was rounded out with fat spears of asparagus, slightly caramelized from being roasted in the oven, and spinach sautéed in olive oil with a little garlic.

Vegetables are treated reverentially at Laurier. One of Fuller's pet peeves is for vegetables not to be given their due, so whatever's fresh and in the market is celebrated. Two, sometimes three generous servings per plate of either emerald-green snap peas, reeds of appealingly bitter rapini, wild mushrooms infused with a little truffle oil, or an especially welcome stranger, fennel and leek "mélange" that was an ideal complement to the best of the seafood entrées, the Herb Marinated Seared Tuna.

Some appetite should be reserved to sample at least a couple of Laurier's fine desserts. The very best is Fuller's interpretation of the classic French pastry, Millefeuille. His has considerably fewer "feuille" ("leaves") because it's made with crisped triangles of phyllo dough (actually Greek for "leaf") rather than the traditional puff pastry. It works like a dream and is assembled with a layer of voluptuous crème anglaise, then studded with whatever berries are fresh at the market that day. The Chocolate Cake is divine, (un) baked to order, in other words, rescued from the oven while it's still molten or lava-like in the center. You might consider whiling away the fifteen or so minutes that the cake takes with a glass of dessert wine, either the ambrosial, fig-flavored Yalumba from Australia or Mendelson, a sultry Pinot Gris that tastes a lot like apricots.

Wine exclusively is offered at this café and wine bar, which seemed to suit the patrons enjoying the prevailing southeastern breezes wafting through the small, jasmine-covered patio one evening. The wine list is short but selective, judiciously priced, and concentrates mostly on California.

Flying in the face of standard restaurant wisdom, tables are not filled to capacity because Fuller knows exactly how many people he can feed at once and he wants all of them to come back. "We're in for the long haul. Remember, 'Pigs get fat, hogs get slaughtered!'"

*Kathi Mosbacher is a freelance food editor and author of The Adventurous Palate©—Houston, The Intrepid Gourmet's Guide to Unique Restaurants.*