



The Unlikely Chef

>>Gary Fuller folds himself into a patio chair at his restaurant - all 6'4" of himself. During this imposing chef's brief stint at Backstreet Café, Chef Hugo called him the "tallest cook on the line." Well, he still is, but today the line is in his own kitchen at the two-year-old Laurier Café & Wine, a restaurant that is small on space but big on taste.

This jewel of an eatery is located on Richmond Ave. and nestled next to the infamous Velvet Melvin, (formerly the Velvet Elvis in the pre-lawsuit days) and across the street from the once colorfully titled, Pink Pussycat. (Notably, the former Pink Pussycat is still a strip club, but now sports a far less flamboyant name.) Despite its nefarious neighbors, Laurier is home to one of the best menus in Houston. Chef Fuller has created an American café with the application of French technique and some of the freshest, finest ingredients in town. This lanky man with steel-grey hair and piercing eyes is renowned for simple dishes that make critic's mouths water. But, the truth is, he never intended to be a chef.

"When we were first married," says co-owner and wife Kelly Kimberly, "our idea of dinner was putting extra cheese on a Chef Boyardee pizza."

Fuller was living in Omaha and working in telecommunications when he first showed an interest in food, particularly in the process of cooking. As luck would have it, both the Fullers' careers moved, and then merged. Kimberly was offered a position with Enron so Chef Fuller opted out of the corporate world with his eye on opening a restaurant. The only problem was that he had no training, so he spent a year at the French Culinary Institute in New York City.

"It was a real production school," Chef Fuller states. "You cook in the kitchen, you don't sit around and talk about which truffle

oil to use." After an intensive emersion in the culinary arts, Fuller spent a brief stint working with Chef Hugo. Then he and Kimberly started scouting locations for their own restaurant.

"We didn't know enough to be scared," Kimberly recalls, "which may have been a blessing."

The greater Houston area has more than 7,000 restaurants, the largest market in the Southwestern United States. And every day new ones open - and close - some lasting barely six months. So, how did a brand new chef and his wife start a café that has not only lasted, but also won rave reviews? Not the way you might think.

The real success of Laurier is not due to its marketing or ambience — although this former drive-thru barbeque spot does have a fresh and artsy atmosphere. No, its main appeal has been the food from the start. For a man who came late to cooking, Fuller has taken to it like a master.

The menu is full of delicious dishes made with amazing ingredients and minimal handling. No heavy sauces here. No extreme seasoning either. The beef is dry-aged and rubbed with chipotle. The crab cakes are lump meat bound ever so loosely with egg white, nearly melting in your mouth. The gazpacho is icy and the salads need no dressing - they stand on their own flavors like bastions of taste, daring you to add even a hint of the ground black pepper the waiter offers.

There's a roasted chicken and chopped endive salad, a special steak salad, one of the best Caesar's in town, and a goat cheese salad that will make you want to buy a herd of your own. There are also delightful sandwiches, perfect pastas, exemplary entrees served with faultless vegetables and a side of risotto so impeccable, you'll completely give up trying to make it at home.

In keeping with his commitment to the very best ingredients, Chef Fuller serves beef from Niman-Schell Ranch in California, renowned as the best American beef to be found. The salmon served at Laurier is wild, not farm raised. The chicken is free-range and the tuna, sushi grade.

And there's more: a desert menu that won't send you into a diabetic coma (think, luscious fruit tarts and lemon mousses) and a Sunday brunch menu offering outstanding egg dishes.

And lest we forget the rest of Laurier's name, the wine list is itself astounding. For such a tiny place - the entire restaurant seats less than 100 - the wine list is enormous, eclectic and very reasonably priced. So don't let the neighboring topless club or bizarre bar fool you, Laurier is a diamond of an eatery in this odd little neighborhood. The fact is, no matter where you plunked it down, people would still come, just for the food. ●

Laurier Café & Wine, 3139 Richmond Ave., 713.807.1632

Laurier's Egg Custard With Goat Cheese, Chives and Truffle Oil



An easy, simple, yummy Sunday brunch idea from Chef Fuller. Wonderful with a chilled glass of white wine outside on the patio on a lovely Spring day!

Makes 4 servings

2/3 cup	Milk
2/3 cup	Heavy cream
2	Egg yolks
2 T	Chopped fresh chives
2 T	Goat cheese
1 T	Truffle oil

Instructions

Heat milk and heavy cream.

In a blender containing the egg yolks, mix in hot milk/cream mixture slowly to avoid curdling eggs.

Then add chopped chives and goat cheese. Blend until thoroughly combined and to puree chives.

Add truffle oil and salt to taste. Strain mixture, discarding solids, and let custard mixture rest for 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat four cups of water in a saucepan and generously space four custard cups in an ovenproof container.

After custard has rested, ladle foam from the top of the mixture and discard, taking care not to further agitate the custard.

Then divide custard mixture evenly among the cups. Using a spoon, remove any remaining bubbles from the mixture.

Add enough hot water to submerge the cups to two-thirds level and cover the container with foil. Carefully place container in a 350 degree oven and cook until custard mixture just sets, roughly 25 to 30 minutes. When jiggled the custards should move but not be runny.

When done, remove cups from water bath and let cool.

Custards may be served room temperature or chilled. Garnish with chopped chives or with chive oil, just touched with truffle oil.