

laurier cafe and wine

ADDRESS 3139 Richmond, between Kirby & Buffalo Speedway

TELEPHONE 713-807-1632

CUISINE New American, bistro style

PRICE RANGE Appetizers \$5 to

\$10, entrees \$12 to

\$23, desserts \$7

CREDIT CARDS Visa, MC, AmEx

HOURS Lunch 11:30

am-2 pm Tue.-Fri.;

dinner 5-10 pm Tue.-

Thu., 5-11 pm

Fri.-Sat. Closed Sun. & Mon.

RESERVATIONS Recommended, especially on weekends

NOISE LEVEL Civilized



that dish manages to come off as wholesome (a spicy chipotle rub instead of butter or creamy horseradish sauce on the meat, no sour cream or cheese on baked potatoes). You get the idea.

Actually I didn't sample the steak and *frites* although I could tell on a busy Saturday night that they were a popular choice. Too many other items whetted my curiosity. Crabcakes are

probably as common in Houston as steak and potatoes, but Laurier's version caught my eye and, from the first bite, pleased my palate. Laws defy the cylinder of subtly seasoned,

sautéed crabmeat holding together, but somehow it remained poised on a drizzle of slightly rosy, tomato *beurre blanc*, a delicate, perfect combination. The best appetizer, I decided. That was before I tried a vegetable tart. Call me fickle, but the savory layers of eggplant, artichokes, leek, fennel, roasted beets and carrots, held together with goat cheese and baked on the thinnest disk of pastry, ultimately won my heart.

Salads didn't bowl me over in the same way. The mixed greens garnished with a goat-cheese crouton and honey-eyed pecans, as well as the simple mesclun salad with balsamic vinaigrette, struck me as perfectly fresh, but ordinary. If you don't buy great produce and make inventive salads at home, you're likely to be less judgmental, well pleased, in fact. Gumbo, based on different key ingredients each day, always figures among the starters and luncheon offerings. Although suitably darkened by roux and described as "hearty," I found the soup more gentrified than the thick okra- and rice-laden brew dished up in area Cajun kitchens. Chicken and andouille sausage or duck and andouille appeared to alternate on the fall menu.

Chef/owner Gary Fuller takes a giant leap in preparing his entrees by purchasing top-of-the-line meat and fish from the likes of Niman Ranch and other "free-range," "dry-aged," "sushi-grade," "all-natural" distributors.

BAY TOWN

By Patricia Martin

I don't remember what the utilitarian one-story building used to be. Given the eclectic neighborhood, it could have been a blueprint shop, a dentist's office or a tarot-reading room. Aside from fresh paint and some glass bricks, Laurier Cafe's exterior still conveys an efficient stylelessness. Delight comes, however, when you enter and discover an inviting space, simple in design and ornamentation, but warmly lit and highlighted with an azure blue wall, one of strawberry red and another of lemon yellow. Contemporary art hangs throughout the dining room. A side wall of glass reveals a trellised (soon to be jasmine-covered) patio for al fresco dining.

Not inappropriately, the food at Laurier (French for "bay leaf") reflects the same minimalist formula. Don't look for heavily sauced meat, contrived stacks of mismatched ingredients or a fashionable menu. Instead, think premium, seasonal, clean, straightforward.

In true bistro style, steak and *pommes frites* heads the list of entrees, but even

Stocked with such ingredients, Fuller has the good sense to allow them to remain themselves. A perfect example was the dry-packed scallops served as a special one evening. Rubbed with roasted-chile seasoning, they were quickly cooked to preserve their moist sweetness and served over shredded, roasted beets and carrots in a subtle scallion, leek and ginger broth. The scallop taste remained pure scallop, but the beets bled into the broth and created such a divine concoction that I couldn't resist dragging each nubbin of shellfish through it.

A generous portion of fresh pork loin had been marinated in a chipotle and citrus mixture, then roasted to a fully cooked, but not overdone, state. Its taste was indeed clean and pure; however, I (obviously not so clean and pure) thought it would have benefited from at least a little *jus*. Side dishes of low-cream mashed potatoes, grilled asparagus and sautéed spinach maintained the spirit of the dish. Similarly, thyme-marinated tuna was quickly seared to produce a thin-crust exterior and left rare through the center. Its vegetable companions were a fennel and leek melange, grilled asparagus and snap peas, but nary a drop of sauce.

More complexity figured in the preparation of veggie plates, but they, too, remain distant cousins of grati-need potatoes or broccoli with cheese. An attractive vegetable plate included the fennel and leek melange, sautéed spinach, snap peas and roasted carrots, along with truffle-oiled mushrooms and a risotto cake. Another satisfying combination was risotto with parmesan, mushrooms and asparagus tips, anointed with truffle oil.

Restraint gives way on the desserts unless you remain in a low-sugar vein and choose the cheese plate, but I suggest throwing caution aside and trying Fuller's *millefeuille*. In this nouveau version, he substitutes three slim-crisp layers of phyllo for classic puff pastry, then fills them with vanilla custard and fresh sliced berries. An excellent molten chocolate cake in a pool of

crème Anglaise carries decadence even further, but you're likely to find something similar in other restaurants. If you're feeling virtuous, try light, tangy lemon mousse with berries.

The well-chosen wine list leans toward California and France and provides a number of bottles in the \$20 to \$30 category. Approximately 15 selections from a changing list are available by the glass.

Credit for the culinary skill, creativity and cash behind this attractive and reasonable neighborhood eatery goes to Fuller, a graduate of the French Culinary Institute in New York, and his wife, co-owner Kelly Kimberly. Escapees from the corporate world (she, from Enron), they've fleshed out their dream with clarity of vision and, one sincerely hopes, a good business plan. And, miraculously, they've managed to train the most personable, professional staff I've encountered in a new restaurant venture.