

And Dinner, Too

PG's Red House Cafe branches out.

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By Jeanne Howard | [0 comments](#)

Photo by Randy Tunnell. Comfort Food: The Red House Cafe does your favorites right.

Bring your hungry, your stressed, and your overworked. Red House Cafe will ease the pain. It's not about snappy, cutting-edge this and that--simplicity, comfort, and relaxation reign, from decor to food to service.

Chef Christopher D'Amelio and wife/co-owner/bookkeeper Laura are taking care of business. After six-plus years of honing breakfast and lunch to a soft sheen, their Red House Cafe is now open for dinner six nights a week and is already on a short list of restaurants where you can order randomly from the menu and be assured of a good meal.

I happened to dine at the Red House in late June during a rare climatic event. It was 75 degrees at 7pm in Pacific Grove. The natives were identifiable by their bare, white arms and they were out in force, filling the seats on the porch and in three, small dining rooms in the converted circa-1890 house (which was still a residence until the D'Amelios took over).

Red House Cafe is original PG charm, with stained wood floors, painted wood walls, and a fireplace in the front dining room. The Man and I took a seat near an open window where a breeze was blowing the curtains into the room, making me nostalgic for the days before all manner of window treatments. White tablecloths signaled that it was no longer lunchtime.

Erin, our waitress, immediately brought ice water to hydrate our shriveling skin, ran down the specials, and left us to read the menu. Francese bread and piquant Spanish olive caponata appeared in quantity befitting a starter course.

D'Amelio defines his cuisine as "contemporary American." That describes most of us *and the food we like to eat*--traditional with a fresh spin. But don't expect to show up at dinner and order your favorite lunch items. D'Amelio wouldn't think of boring us with a simple extension of operating hours. Crab cakes are the only item on both the lunch and dinner menus.

Small plates, priced from \$8.25 to \$10.95, include Portabella mushroom over polenta with marinara sauce and Parmesan; a Bleu cheese souffle served with mixed greens and sliced pears; and Black Prince Edward Island mussels in a tomato broth. These could serve as a

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light meal with a side or soup or salad (don't miss these starter courses at the bottom of the menu where you might not notice them until it's too late).

Wines are reasonably priced with most glasses from \$5 to \$6; most bottles are \$23 to \$33. Ever-smiling Erin delivered glasses of Grgich Hills Fume Blanc. Honey, fruit, herbaceous and floral tones complemented the salads in this medium-light wine. Later with our entrees, we discovered the Mont Pellier Syrah to be a great value with plum, berry, pepper and a hint of smoke.

The salads would satisfy the most rapacious herbivore. We even had to leave a large beet on one plate, against all moral and behavioral codes--we were that satiated. The highly recommended red and yellow beet salad was sprinkled with goat cheese (it was just as well it wasn't layered like the menu said) and toasted pine nuts. Toasting really makes a positive difference with nuts and is appreciated. The spinach, pear, candied pecan and blue cheese salad was also very good with an extra step taken to poach the pears. It's a special but is offered most nights.

A strong sense of déjà vu fell over me when my grilled lamb filets arrived arranged around a ring of spinach that encircled a center of mashed potatoes, with fresh chopped tomatoes. The portions were ample, the brown sauce was loaded with flavor (including a tinge of truffle oil), and the lamb was done precisely the way I ordered it. I also had a vague sense that I'd had previous encounters with the lemon beurre blanc sauce that's served with several dishes (including the Filet of Sole special), and the familiarity was present again when I read the description of the medallions of pork tenderloin dish.

It came to me that Taste Cafe in Pacific Grove serves similar entrees in a similar fashion, as does Cafe Rustica in Carmel Valley. A historical perspective explains everything: Christopher and Laura D'Amelio opened Taste Cafe in 1990 with Christopher's sister and brother-in-law, Sylvia and Paulo Kautz. In 1996, Christopher and Laura broke away to open Red House Cafe. Paulo and Sylvia then sold Taste Cafe in 1999 and opened Cafe Rustica.

All three restaurants have their own stamp on their respective menus and yet there is an overlap, a link that places them squarely in the same species of dining establishments. This is a good thing.

The dessert menu is presented orally, with the treats on view in a glass case. The gist of the desserts is crisps, cobblers, tarts, and cake--things we know and love. The carrot cake brought our dinner to a close with a delicious, lemon-accented rendition.

Red House Cafe is one of those places that makes running a good restaurant look easy, but we know better. If it were easy, everyone would be doing it, and everyone isn't.

Red House Cafe

662 Lighthouse Ave., Pacific Grove; 643-1060

Tues-Sun 8am-2:30pm; Dinner 5-8:30pm.