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Off the Menu: If you have the time, Pacific Grove's little Red House Cafe is the perfect place for a simple, savory dinner

In the Red

Raul N. Off the Menu

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I could wax poetic about how the banana and Nutella panini at Red House Cafe makes for the perfect, sweet, morning indulgence, or how grabbing a sandwich and a glass of housemade lemonade on the patio is my favorite summer pastime. Instead, I find myself sitting down to write about dinner at Red House Cafe.

Red House Cafe always seems to fly under my radar when I'm looking for dinner. And yet I had dinner there twice this past weekend.

The first time was out of convenience — a quick dinner of crab cakes (two for \$10) and the spinach salad (served with poached pears, blue cheese and candied pecans, tossed in balsamic vinaigrette for \$9.50) before a movie at Lighthouse Cinemas.

The crab cakes were packed with fresh Dungeness, along with a kick of spice from diced peppers and red onion. The outside was just barely golden, with a slight little crunch.

The spinach salad is one of my lunchtime favorites that makes an appearance at dinner. The sweet pears were so juicy — perfect against tart and tangy crumbled blue cheese. I swapped out balsamic for champagne vinaigrette instead; it pulled the flavors together far better.

It had been hard to pass on my perennial favorite, chicken Parmigiana, so I came in to snag it for dinner the next night.

On a Saturday night, the restaurant was packed. Without a reservation, I wound up on the back patio. But take it from me, on a busy night, I prefer this back patio to the bustling restaurant

inside.

Red House Cafe is known for its soups — they're always so smooth and creamy. I started dinner with a bowl of the night's curried cauliflower soup (\$6.50). The addition of chicken stock added body, and I loved the hint of curry spice. It was a generous portion served in a bowl with an image of a lion on it! Rawr!

I'd come for chicken...and then I heard about one of the seafood specials — sea scallops in a saffron beurre blanc sauce with mashed potatoes and sautéed vegetables (\$23).

Sorry, chicken Parm, I was sold on the mere mention of saffron beurre blanc!

The scallops portion was unusual — there were a generous number of scallops, but they weren't terribly big. But that sauce made up for any shortcomings in portion — the light touch of saffron gave the beurre blanc an incredible color and flavor.

The sides, however, disappointed — the sautéed veggies and mashed potatoes were kind of bland.

With a dessert case packed with a plethora of pies, I chose the Dutch apple pie (\$6.50). The apples were tender, with a generous sprinkling of cinnamon. However, I would have preferred more of the crumbled streusel topping — my favorite part of Dutch apple pie.

Service both nights was friendly and attentive, even with a full house. But I do have to say, Red House Cafe has never been known for speedy service. I've never been able to get in and out in under an hour.

Sure enough, it took full disclosure of movie plans to the server on Friday night to get out in time for the movie.

If you're in a hurry, it's probably best to skip Red House Cafe. But this hidden treasure in sleepy Pacific Grove is worth the wait.

And just a word of warning for those of us who usually pay by plastic — Red House Cafe is now cash-only, so make sure you stop by the ATM beforehand to pick up money.

Red House Cafe, 662 Lighthouse Ave., Pacific Grove. Info: 643-1060, www.redhousecafe.com.

Back to school

This summer, I'm going back to school at Happy Girl Kitchen in Pacific Grove. About once a month, in-house baker Stephanie Stein teaches curious students how to bake the sweet treats she makes for the cafe.

I'm not much of a baker, but I do love consuming baked goods. Chatting with Stephanie about her creations, she assured me it wasn't all that difficult for me to master at home. I figured, why not give it a shot?

In her most recent class, "Savory Baking," Stephanie shared recipes for sweet potato biscuits, sun-dried tomato and Manchego scones, and potato and caramelized onion galettes.

We learned how to knead the dough just enough to leave oat-shaped chunks of butter intact — the secret to the flaky crust of the galette.

Stephanie shared with us her tips for eggless baking. We sampled different whole-grain flours to add flavor and texture to everyday baked goods. And of course we got to feast on our creations!

Stephanie is a great teacher, very hands-on and patient with students — and any teacher who can put up with me in her class deserves a gold star!

Be sure to check out my blog for more of my cooking (mis)adventures!

Stephanie's next class — "Redefining Homemade" — is coming up this Saturday, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Rather than learning three recipes, this time would-be bakers will learn just one — almond cherry scones.

But they'll also learn how to make the ingredients, including oat flour, wheat flour, vanilla bean syrup and almond milk. This class gives new meaning to making food from scratch!

Redefining Homemade costs \$110 per person and includes a light lunch. The class will be held at Happy Girl Kitchen, 173 Central Ave. in Pacific Grove. Contact Stephanie Stein to sign up: (209) 481-9727 or gushigan@gmail.com.

Best Thing I Ate All Week

While grabbing dinner at Bistro Moulin on a sunny Sunday, I was in the mood for something light and summery, so I chose the Crêpes Sarrasin.

It's a new preparation for summer — buckwheat crepes wrapped around chicken, mushrooms and spring peas, served in a velouté.

The delicate crepes elegantly topped with pea shoots were a sight to behold. The flavors were rich yet light. And that velouté sauce was sublime — I resisted the urge to lick my plate clean! Magnifique!

Hungry for more? Follow Raul online. Blog: offthemenublog.wordpress.com; Yelp: rauln.yelp.com; Twitter: [@bistrohopping](https://twitter.com/bistrohopping); email: offthemenublog@gmail.com. GO!

Meet Raul

Nobody combines social media and the art of dining out better than Raul N., an avid foodie, photographer and blogger who will bring his insights to readers each week exclusively in GO! An Elite Yelper for two years (posting 321 reviews), the 28-year-old Pacific Grove resident also writes a food blog and posts on Twitter and Foodspotting. A daily diner, Raul will share his opinions on everything from food trucks to coffee houses.