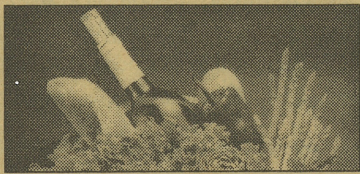


SERVING THE MONTEREY PENINSULA AND SALINAS VALLEY

MONTEREY COUNTY
The Herald

THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 1998

TABLE TALK



MARTIN MEURSAULT

A secret no more

What you see on this page is the result of moral conflict.

One half of my ethical self says that there is no sense writing about this place at all. It already has enough business; I personally don't need to deal with any more competition when I'm waiting for one of the scarce tables here.

The other, more generous side of me recognizes the selfishness inherent in that stance, and believes that it is my duty as an objective restaurant reviewer and public servant to let all my readers know how good this place is.

As you can see, my better half has triumphed. On the other hand, it has taken almost two years for my better side to overcome my stingy, possessive, meaner side.

Red House Cafe opened in September 1996; and it was a winner from the day it opened its doors, despite the fact that there wasn't even a sign out front for a long while.

Part of the success was due to the controversy that surrounded the building. The historic Victorian — just up the block from the Pacific Grove post office — was almost torn down, before being rescued, in large part, by vigorous local support. In short, long before the Red House Cafe opened, the building in which it was to find a home had already captured the hearts of the local populace. Once the current owners took over, Pacific Grove residents watched the renovation with great interest. Since the beginning, the Cafe's business has been 98-percent local.

Then, when word went out that the restaurant would be run by two people from the highly regarded Taste Cafe and Bistro in Pacific Grove, expectations rose dramatically. The Cafe's proprietors are Laura Medina-D'Amelio and Chris D'Amelio. Laura's sister is Sylvia Medina who, with husband Paulo Kautz, owns Taste.

When Medina and Kautz opened Taste in 1990, Laura and Chris moved here from San



Robert Fish/The Herald

THE RED HOUSE CAFE is located in an historic Victorian building in Pacific Grove, just up the block from the post office.

Red House Cafe

662 Lighthouse Ave.,
Pacific Grove
643-1060

Tuesday through Friday 7:30
a.m.-3 p.m.; Saturday and
Sunday 8 a.m.-3 p.m.; closed
Monday

Cash and local checks only
Wine and beer license pending
Wheelchair access: No

The bottom line: This Pacific Grove boutique serves consistently excellent breakfasts and lunches, all interesting in concept and delicious in the mouth. Warning: The cafe's popularity and hand-crafted preparation means you may have to wait.

Diego to help with the process. In due time, Laura and Chris decided to open their own restaurant. Thus began the Red House Cafe in 1996.

The city of Pacific Grove granted the cafe a limited license, which meant it could have 20 seats with full service, or 50 seats with limited table service. Since the proprietors opted for the larger seating, customers order at a counter as soon as they walk in the door, then sit down, and the food is brought to the table when ready. Still, the interior feels a bit more formal than that: Service is with decent china, silverware and linen napkins.

What really sets the Red House Cafe apart from the competition is their boutique-style ambience and the consistently excellent quality of their

food. Each dish comes to your table freshly prepared and attractive looking, with just a bit more flair than you expect — interesting in concept and delicious in the mouth.

For example, the breakfast sandwich (\$5.75) comes on a croissant, slit in half and toasted, filled with good quality Black Forest ham and a huge pillow of scrambled eggs. The eggs have been whipped and steamed, to make them airy and light, which makes them a pleasure to look at, as well as interesting to eat.

Alongside comes a nice helping of roasted herbed potatoes — the small red ones, quartered, and spiced to an attractive succulence — and a salsa fresca — made with fresh-roasted tomatoes, garlic, cilantro and just a touch of jalapeño.

Other breakfast items (served until 11 a.m.) include caramelized grapefruit (\$2); Belgian waffles (\$4.75); Irish oatmeal with brown sugar and raisins (\$4.25); spiced chunky applesauce with creme fraiche (\$3.75); smoked salmon with creme fraiche and challah (\$6.25); and frittata (\$6.95).

For lunch, I'd try one of the homemade soups of the day (small \$3.50; large, \$4.25) if you are so inclined. I tried the tomato and basil soup, and it was terrific. A puree of fresh ingredients, it tasted absolutely fresh and light, with just a touch of cream to smooth out the acidity.

The salads are hugely generous, with absolutely fresh, high-quality ingredients and creative garnishes. My daughter had the mixed greens (small, \$3.50;

large, \$5.25), a serious salad, with the organic greens, topped with tomatoes and feta cheese, tossed with a fine vinaigrette, and served with dollops of an excellent orzo salad, caramelized red onions, and roasted red bell peppers. Other salads include a wedge of iceberg lettuce with blue cheese dressing (\$5.25) and a Caesar (small, \$3.50; large, \$5.25).

I've tried several sandwiches (\$5.95), and they've all been great. Each comes with cold orzo pasta salad and assorted olives on the side — though occasionally the kitchen substitutes something like a white bean salad or lentils, if the whim strikes them.

Most recently, I ordered the pork tenderloin on rosemary focaccia bread with sage aioli. The pork — like all the other meats — is roasted each morning, trimmed of all fat, sliced thin and piled high. Topped with lettuce, tomato and crisp bacon and smeared with aioli, this is a taste-packed, creamy and moist sandwich.

Each day features a different lunch special. Most recently, I had the polenta lasagna (\$8.95) — layers of buttery polenta, gooey mozzarella, earthy portabellas, and creamy tomato, finished with freshly grated Parmesan. Another frequent special is a corned-beef Reuben on country rye bread with warm potato salad.

Choose desserts from the pastry case. Beverages include freshly squeezed juices, excellent coffee and espresso, all at bargain prices.

RED HOUSE CAFE