

Barnett on Business Travel: Artistry of da Vinci takes flight at airport-area restaurant

by Chris Barnett

The last place you expect to find classic regional Italian cuisine is at an airport. Particularly in a restaurant celebrating the 15th century artist Leonardo da Vinci, who gave the world the "Mona Lisa" and "The Last Supper." But entrepreneurial chef Stefano Colaiacomo has taken a carefully considered culinary flier and has opened Stefano's da Vinci Ristorante (www.stefanosdavinci.com) at Daugherty's Sky Harbor, an executive jet complex one minute away from Long Beach (Calif.) Airport, which looks like a film set from the 1930s.

Why dabble in da Vinci? The man was also an astronomer, architect, inventor and musician, and some say he is the father of the parachute and the helicopter, conceived before Chris Columbus discovered our shores. Cleverly, chef Stefano pays homage to da Vinci on the plate and in the decor. A replica of the Renaissance man's parachute is on display, a model helicopter hangs in the restaurants rotunda - yes, rotunda - and plasma TVs flash various da Vinci paintings and his other works of art. No, don't ask to switch on a Lakers game.

This is a serious culinary concept more suited to Beverly Hills or Boston, but you'd never have the runway views. And rents in a glam city would probably force Stefano to double his menu prices, which are quite reasonable for the quality of the food.

Forget linguini and clams. A signature pasta here is Turtei Al Tartufo d'Alda, which I was told is slang for tortellini stuffed with white truffles and ricotta cheese sauteed with sweet onions and butter and finished with Armenian cheese and a little cracked pepper. The dish is native to Piemonte in northwest Italy. The price: \$15.50 at lunch and \$18 at dinner.

Stefano's cuisine can't be pigeonholed. His Anatra al Mango is oven-roasted Peking duck breast glazed with a tangerine liqueur and mango reduction, served with seasonal Mediterranean vegetables, for \$29.

If you're between flights and not hungry, go for a cocktail and drink in the artistry and the design of this soaring space. Staffing is attentive and professional. Stefano's da Vinci has just taken off and hasn't been discovered yet. But downtown Long Beach has become a mini mecca for Southern California foodies in recent years, so before long they'll find this place. Here are a few other hideaways and one disappointment for adventurous travelers game to dine somewhere different.

HOOKED ON SARDINE IN MADISON

Sardine isn't the tastiest name for a restaurant. It sounds like a bait shack on a rickety pier, or coach class on the monstrous, soon-to-be-airborne Airbus A380. But despite the unappetizing name, Sardine is an inspired, delightful and deliciously priced new restaurant in Madison, the leafy, bustling, college town and capital of Wisconsin.

Housed in a vintage machinery plant with a dining terrace looking out on Lake Monona, Sardine (www.sardinemadison.com) is massive but airy. There's a high-beam-and-ductwork ceiling, a long bar and plenty of young, savvy, friendly and efficient servers who are more than just University of Wisconsin math majors looking for pocket change.

The food is tasty and creatively presented. The priciest dish, a braised veal in a red wine demisauce with sauteed potato gnocchi, tomato and asparagus, costs just \$20. I had the steak frites. The cut was a bit thinner than I expected, but it was delicious and a steal at \$19. Grilled salmon is \$17. Starters start at \$5 and a warm duck confit salad is \$9.

The wine list is short but global with minimal markup: A New Zealand sauvignon blanc called Mud House is \$25, a California Russian River chardonnay is \$26. Wines by the glass are no higher than \$7.50 and the cocktails are skillfully crafted and generously poured.

Two nice touches: There is plenty of space between tables and genial owner-chef Philip Hurley works both the stoves and the room. He also runs a popular breakfast and lunch spot in downtown Madison called Marigold Kitchen.

AT CHEZ JAY, ONLY THE NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGES

The booming Los Angeles showbiz industry is moving toward Santa Monica, Calif., where Joe Roth's hot Revolution Studios is headquartered. Anyone selling to or calling on the entertainment crowd pays \$300-\$400 a night at one of eight chi-chi hotels in the area. At restaurants with no atmosphere or charm, the marked-up, watered-down drinks sell for \$10-\$12 and a steak fetches \$38.

But here's a blast from the past and a worthy tip: The tiny South Seas shack on Ocean Avenue called Chez Jay (www.chezjays.com) is still going strong after more than 45 years of catering to locals and celebs. The late Johnny Carson was a regular. Jerry Brown squired singer Linda Rondstadt here when he was the bachelor governor of California. The Rand Corp. brainiacs are still bar fixtures. The A-listers vie for the secluded back booth.

Tourists? Never. Owner Jay Fiondello, a bit actor who opened the joint and bought the seedy motel years ago to make a buck, is 80 now and rarely at the door. Mike Anderson runs the show these days and the food and booze is still basic and classic.

I had a pretty fair chicken Caesar salad for \$7.50 and a great New York strip with sauteed mushrooms for \$21. The gin martini was bone dry and a husky pour for 6 bucks. You can "dine" at the bar. I struck up a chat with two local television reporters on my left and a veteran film grip on my right. The grip was discreet about the on-set peccadilloes of the stars, so I guess he took me for a snoopy National Enquirer reporter.

Nothing much changes at Chez Jay: The decor is weathered news clippings, dead palm fronds, snapshots of good customers down through the years and some nautical mementos. Somehow, though, it keeps you coming back.

\$11 PANCAKES AND \$18 MANHATTANS

Sarabeth's Kitchen (www.sarabeth.com) is a breakfast, brunch, lunch and dinner icon with four addresses in New York City and an outpost down in Key West, Fla. The original upper Madison Avenue "kitchen" is always jammed, and the minuscule waiting area is claustrophobic. But it's worth the wait. The hostess and servers are personable and all seem to be aspiring actors. Service is sharp and Sarabeth's fare is imaginative and generously portioned.

During one breakfast, I passed on the pumpkin waffle and chose the lemon and ricotta pancakes (\$11). Holland pork and apricot sausage (\$5.50) also rates a special mention. Sarabeth's even has real milkshakes and ice cream floats (\$5-\$6). And her mail-order jams and pastries are known nationwide.

You won't fare so well at New York's legendary Algonquin Hotel. I had a house Manhattan straight up in the legendary Blue Bar that cost an eye-opening \$18 including tip. Worse, it was made with 80-proof Jim Beam, a boring bourbon many bars carry as their house whiskey because the pour cost is cheap and the markups are big. I expected more from this well-preserved one-time haunt for America's literary lions.

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