
NOTABLE EDIBLES

BY NANCY MICHALI

LOVELY VESTA

Located in the Ojai Arcade space that formerly housed Tottenham Court, Vesta has become a beautiful, relaxing place to eat, sit, talk and enjoy life with friends and family. Founded by two sisters—Debbie Curry and Lisa Salmans—Vesta Home & Hearth is an inviting destination for breakfast and lunch and is filled with beautiful things to buy for yourself and others. Having a hard day? Come to Vesta, sit indoors or outdoors and feel yourself being soothed by Lisa's attention, the beautiful setting and the delicious food.

Raised by a grandmother who expressed her love through baking and cooking for her large family, Debbie and Lisa have carried on that tradition at Vesta. Debbie, the designing sister, has created an inviting space of casual elegance. Bringing 30 years of food and beverage service, Lisa has developed a sophisticated, casual menu with an emphasis on fresh, healthy food. Vesta offers freshly baked goods and, in the future, will offer Debbie's famous chocolates.

The adventuresome menu is divided into Brunch, Small Bites, For the Kid in All of Us, and Lunch. Plus, Vesta has continued the Tottenham Court tradition of afternoon tea, ranging in scale from "A Spot of Tea" to "The Queen's Tea." To me the most interesting food is represented by the Small Bites and Lunch menus. The Small Bites offerings draw on the flavors of many cuisines from Japanese (ahi poke) to Greek with a Seven-Layer Mediterranean Dip blending hummus, cucumber, lettuce, black olives and feta cheese. On the Lunch menu, the soup of the day is always worth ordering—fresh, unique and satisfying. My favorite sandwiches include the Chicken Pesto Panini (a perfect melding of flavors), Andi's Tuna Sandwich and the Vegetarian Panini of fire-roasted vegetables with red pepper aioli. And don't forget to order a side of their delicious fries—standard, garlic or sweet potato.

Vesta is evolving and has started offering special food events worth checking out. Join them for Happy Hour every Thursday from 5 to 7 pm with live music. Or sign up for the monthly wine pairing dinners celebrating different cuisines and wines. In the mornings, you can drop by after 7 am for a freshly prepared healthy box lunch for your child. Vesta offers catering and a beautiful setting for hosting special events from an anniversary dinner for two to larger celebrations.

Vesta Home and Hearth, 242 E. Ojai Ave., Ojai; 805-646-2339; www.vestaojai.com.

CATERING TO EVERY TASTE

Don't look around too quickly, but the holidays are almost upon us. Now is the time to start planning ahead for those holiday dinners and parties for which you may not want to do all the work yourself. Local caterers can provide delicious solutions to your culinary challenges. Many restaurants provide catering services. Here in Ojai, a partial list of local eateries providing personalized catering services includes Feast Bistro, The Garden Terrace, Ojai Café Emporium, Rainbow Bridge, Sakura Ojai, Sea Fresh Seafood and Vesta. Or you may want to consider a talented local chef offering private catering services. Here's an introduction to three smaller private caterers in the Ojai-Ventura area:

- For an enjoyable and tasty occasion, consider **David Cagnacci** of *The Event Caddy*. David received his training from the Scottsdale Culinary Institute and Le Cordon Bleu Culinary Institute and he learned a diversity of menus by serving as chef and executive chef at restaurants throughout the United States. He specializes in small, full-service events and takes pride in creating a unique menu for each event. David offers two types of events services: 1) full service, where the food is prepared and served for you; and 2) prepare-ahead service, where the food is prepared, the table is set and you serve the food. He is a warm,



friendly chef who prides himself on providing special culinary attention to you and your guests.

• For healthy food services with a French accent, try **Patricia Cuenot** of *Ma Cuisine*. Born and raised in Paris, she learned cooking basics from her mother, who was an accomplished cook. Patricia expanded her culinary training with intensive studies of holistic health and macrobiotic cooking, and widened her exposure to other cuisines through years of travel to Morocco, India, Japan and the Far East. Ma Cuisine provides food that tastes, looks and feels delicious and balanced. Patricia will work with you to develop a menu that meets your needs.

• For delectably unique food, try **Rachel Main** of *The Main Course*. Rachel has a culinary arts degree from Nicholls State University in Southern Louisiana, down the bayou from New Orleans, and has worked extensively throughout the culinary industry including serving as the commis and farm manager at the famous French Laundry restaurant. She provides customized in-home dinner parties, luncheon, brunches, buffets and cocktail-appetizer parties with panache and warmth. Rachel's services include planning, preparing, serving and cleaning up for parties or special occasions.

Local restaurants: Feast Bistro 805-640-9260; The Garden Terrace 805-646-1133; Ojai Café Emporium 805-646-2723; Rainbow Bridge 805-646-6623; Sakura Ojai 805-649-5555; Sea Fresh Sea Food 805-646-7747; and Vesta 805-646-2339.

Local chefs and cooks: David Cagnacci, The Event Caddy, 805-798-7742, theeventcaddy@verizon.net; Patricia Cuenot, Ma Cuisine 805-252-5882, patriciadube@yahoo.com; and Rachel Main, The Main Event, 805-204-7720, main.rachel@gmail.com.

THE PERFECT NEIGHBORHOOD RESTAURANT

Since opening in February 2007, Giannfranco's Trattoria in Carpinteria has had people lining up to enjoy its excellent food and friendly service. This is a family-owned and -operated neighborhood restaurant—mother Anna Sherwyn warmly welcomes locals and visitors at the door, father Franco Canteras ensures things run smoothly and son Chef Giovanni Sherwyn cooks up a delicious storm in a small, busy kitchen. Not originally from Carpinteria, Chef Giovanni chose to locate here where his food could “make a difference.” Welcome to a warm, delicious place that you won't want to leave. The delicious flavors start with the homemade herb-filled dipping oil and they keep on coming. The Trattoria has a simple menu so that every dish is freshly prepared with local ingredients. While Chef Giovanni views the menu as simple, the dinner menu offers 12 regular pasta dishes and eight fish, meat and poultry dishes. In addition, there are daily salad, risotto, meat and fish specials. More than enough to tantalize everyone.

We shared the evening's Burrata Cheese Salad Special—a colorful presentation of creamy Burrata cheese served with thin slices of apples, fresh prosciutto, golden pine nuts and yellow heirloom tomatoes topped with fresh basil. Add a glass of excellent Italian wine and life is good. Chef Giovanni recommended the daily pasta special and the Braised Short Ribs from the menu. The pasta special was Guanciale all'Amatriciana—unsmoked Italian bacon prepared from pig's jowls served in a spicy tomato sauce with fresh rolled pasta sheets.

The pasta is handmade to better soak up the delicious spicy sauce. The Braised Short Ribs were served on a bed of sautéed spinach, with diced carrots, small onions, Yukon Gold potato pieces, sweet garlic cloves and astringent rosemary. The meat was so well-cooked that it fell off the bone with a touch of the fork—perfectly prepared, flavorful comfort food.

While pleasantly full, we were tantalized by the lovely desserts. Chef Giovanni's sister makes the desserts and they are sweet jewels, providing a fitting end to a superb meal. We selected two to enjoy: The Mango Mousse Tart was ladyfingers layered with strawberry and vanilla mousses topped and wrapped in dark chocolate; the Italian Apple Tart nicely balanced the earthy flavor of sliced apples with an Amaretto-flavored ricotta filling.

Former home of a delicatessen, the Trattoria's interior space has been elegantly redesigned with warm Mediterranean colors and dark wood furnishings. Choose a seat inside or call ahead and reserve a table in their landscaped patio. Lunch or dinner—every meal at Giannfranco's is a special event!

Giannfranco's Trattoria, 666 Linden Ave., Carpinteria; 805-684-0720.



EL REY CANTINA

The King is back and living in Downtown Ventura at a new restaurant with excellent food and drinks. The El Rey Cantina celebrates Elvis “El Rey” Presley along with 24 other musicians, ranging from Frank Sinatra to Sid Vicious, who are all now with Elvis in another realm.

The El Rey Cantina serves the same menu of primarily Mexican food everyday from 11:30 am to 1 am. We went for lunch, which is more sedate noisewise, and then for dinner, when the place rocks. The menu is short, but the food is well worth the visit. The Cantina’s reasonably priced à la carte offerings are divided into Antojitos (appetizers) and Especiales de la Casa. Tasty homemade tortilla chips and salsa were brought while we read through the colorful six-page menu. For lunch, we enjoyed the Tostada Salad—an excellent Mexican-style Caesar salad of Romaine lettuce, roasted fresh-cut corn, chunks of ripe tomatoes, black beans and roasted peppers tossed with a pepitas (pumpkin seeds) dressing and topped with feta cheese and served in a crisp tortilla shell. Next we sampled the Trio of Enchiladas—three cheese enchiladas made with homemade tortillas and each served in a red, white or green sauce. There’s only one problem with sharing: clashing forks as we both dive in for more! When we return another night for dinner, we enjoy the unbelievable El Rey-style hamburger flavored with cumin and roasted jalapeños, topped with melted Monterey Jack cheese and served with excellent fries. And the Quesadilla Boracha—filled with three cheeses, smoky flavored roasted jalapeños, tequila-marinated chicken, tomatoes and onions—is the best quesadilla I have ever tasted. And as befits a cantina, a majority of the menu is devoted to cocktails, tequila and beer. Tequila is king here with more than 85 tequilas offered for your tasting pleasure, while the beer list offers the usual suspects. Be sure and order the excellent House Margarita.

The El Rey Cantina offers a simple, colorful space with an open floor design to encourage socializing and dancing, with tables and large party booths located along the edges. The focal points are the long bar with comfortable seats and the colorful, wall-hung modern jukebox. The space’s barrel-vault ceiling is painted rose-red, and while not a connoisseur of Elvis paintings on velvet, I can appreciate the pictures hung along the edges of the ceiling. At night, the space comes alive with people and music and glows with light from the glass chandeliers and many candles. With the Cantina’s friendly service, delicious food and wide range of drink and music, the King is in the building and is very happy.

El Rey Cantina, 294 E. Main St., Ventura; 805-653-1111.



END NOTES

The **World Flavor Café** opened its door on Signal Street just north of Matilija in Downtown Ojai in mid-August. Serving lunch and dinner Tuesday through Saturday, the café’s menu features food with an Indian flavor including homemade soups, lovely salads and interesting sandwiches such as Tandoori Chicken and Masala Dosa. For dinner, the café will serve the Indian specialties Susan Kapadia cooked up at the former Iron Pan along with regional specialties from around the world. Drop by, enjoy some great food and support this new addition to Ojai’s restaurant scene. *World Flavor Cafe, 205 N. Signal St., Ojai; 805-640-3060.*

Getting ready for the holidays and need your knives sharpened? Want to do some fall pruning and your shears are dull? Ojai resident **Aaron Plunkett**, expert sword-, knife- and shear-sharpener, will come to your house, carefully pick up your cutting tools and return them perfectly sharp and ready to go in 24 hours. Aaron also is an accomplished fisherman and musician. *Aaron Plunkett, 818-425-1120.*



At the new store **Made in Ojai**, owners Roberta Raye and Gillian Bressani have filled their space with beautiful arts, crafts and edibles from Ojai. Stop by and check out their tasty edible offerings including Regalo olive oils, Garlic Gold, Chris Sutton's Highway 33 hot sauces, Zhená's Gypsy teas, Mimi's chocolates and cocoa, Georgette's Passion biscotti and, soon, local honey. They offer Ojai gift baskets with a lovely mug, tea or cocoa, biscotti and honey. *Made in Ojai, 323 E. Matilija St., Ojai; 805-646-2400.*

The newest heat-filled offering—**Sespe Creek Sauce**—from our local hot sauce microbrewery owned by Chris Sutton is now available and joins Charman's Revenge Habanero Pepper Sauce in warming our taste buds. Named after the Sespe Creek and wilderness preserve located between Ojai and Filmore, the new sauce is a blend of four chile peppers: Jalapeño, Guero, Thai and Serrano. The resulting hot sauce is a beautiful green with black flecks—flavorful, slightly sweet but with quite a heat kick! Sespe Creek Sauce can be taste-tested during a meal at Sea Fresh, and is available for purchase from Sea Fresh, Rain's, Westridge Market, Rainbow Bridge and Starr Market here in Ojai. *Sea Fresh Sea Food, 533 E. Ojai St., Ojai; 805-646-7747.*

Nancy Michali, owner and principal instructor of the Ojai Culinary Studio, has more than 30 years of cooking experience along with professional training. She learned to prepare fresh local food from her mother, grandmothers and great-grandmother—all excellent cooks. Nancy honed her skills at the New School of Cooking in Los Angeles and Tante Marie's Cooking School in San Francisco (one of only three American schools named by Gourmet magazine as among the world's 10 great cooking schools).



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