



## **Tradition & Authenticity**

### **Two Ingredients of Suzanne's Cuisine**

*Tracey Ryder, Edible Ojai  
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The dining experience at Suzanne's Cuisine begins the moment you walk through the front door. First, you are greeted and ushered into the lush but cozy room in exactly the same way you would be welcomed into the home of a favorite relative or friend—you are offered a seat, asked about your day, and offered a drink. If you are a regular, the exchanges are specific and personal—and always on a first name basis. If it's cold outside, the fireplaces will be burning—both inside and out on the terrace—and either setting makes you want to curl up, relax, and stay awhile.

If you pick up any food magazine these days, you'll read page after page about how professional restaurateurs from all over the country are spending ungodly amounts of money, time, and energy trying to give their customers this kind of experience. It's become the norm for restaurants seeking a high ranking in the *Zagat Survey* to have a staff of marketing and public relations professionals on hand to make sure the word gets out—and stays positive. Indeed, the restaurant business is competitive and keeping that edge can be tricky. It does take a lot of hard work and energy, but it also takes having a clear vision, consistent food and service, and a solid sense of knowing who you are, which is exactly how Suzanne Roll achieves her success.

An excellent home cook who lived in France, did some training in a Michelin two-star restaurant there, and is Italian by heritage, Suzanne is what diners wish every restaurateur

would be: tremendously talented, in love with food, and entirely authentic. Before she ever opened the doors of her restaurant (12 years ago this November 1<sup>st</sup>), she knew exactly what *kind* of restaurant she wanted to have. “I wanted a place people could come back to over and over again—where the menu was varied and the food was simple and delicious—with the kind of food you would want to eat everyday.”

As our conversation continues in the vein, we have a laugh over a recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* that represents the antithesis of Suzanne’s philosophy about food. The author describes a multi-course meal he recently experienced at a highly rated restaurant in France where one course consisted of a couple of pieces of stale popcorn and another was cotton candy—all to the tune of around six-hundred dollars. “That’s not the way I want to feed people at all. Good food is not contrived, it’s straightforward. It just doesn’t make any sense to me why someone would want to do that. I want people to remember my food because it tasted good, not because it shocked them.” And, after twelve years, it’s safe to say, she’s achieved her goal. *Gourmet* magazine calls her food “the food of love,” and she consistently maintains a high rating in the *Zagat Survey* without a staff of marketing professionals on the payroll.

Perhaps the best quality of this chef is that she understands food from the ground up, meaning she is entirely at home with the European tradition of having a restaurant be connected to a garden, a vineyard, and to the local farmers. Grapes grown at her ranch have been turned into some of the finest California Syrah ever made (Roll Ranch Syrah, made by Adam Tolmach of the Ojai Vineyard). And if you’ve ever wondered why this tiny-framed woman drives such a big pickup truck: it’s for her trips to the farmers’ markets she makes twice a week—Wednesday in Santa Monica and Saturday in Ventura. She buys produce from farmers she’s known and loyally supported for years and admits that when she first opened the restaurant, she had no idea there were produce vendors who delivered to you instead of you going to buy it direct from the farmer. “I had no idea that restaurants had their produce delivered to them. The thought just never occurred to me. If you didn’t go and pick it [the produce] out yourself, how could you know what you were getting?”

Other things come from her ranch too—eggs, figs, and other ingredients she adds to seasonal dishes on the menu. I think of her food as being “high quality, homemade.” It’s innovative while remaining unfussy. Just try any of her original creations to see what I mean, such as Seasonal Seafood on a Bed of Homemade Sauerkraut with Dill *Beurre Blanc* Sauce. This dish has roots in the Alsace region of France, and has been personalized and perfected by Suzanne. From her Italian roots comes Bucatini with Marinara Sauce and Uncle Angelo’s Favorite Meatballs, one of my all-time favorite dishes. It’s what I order when I’m not sure what I’m in the mood for—far beyond a basic “spaghetti and meatballs” kind of meal, this dish transports and comforts me (and I swear, contains some secret ingredient that makes me crave it over and over again).

The other side of the equation for what makes a restaurant successful is less obvious to the diner. It’s all the things that go on behind the scenes: finding and training the staff, managing schedules, dealing with budgets, timelines, booking events, paying bills, etc. In short, it’s called “running the business.” At Suzanne’s Cuisine, these tasks are handled exquisitely by the restaurant’s co-owner, Sandra Moore (also Suzanne’s daughter). Just like her mother, Sandra cares deeply about quality, community, and good food; however, she spends her days holding a laser beam focus on the details that make this restaurant run smoothly. Sandra earned an MBA degree in Chicago before returning to Ojai to help her mother launch the restaurant and uses her education well. She has all the qualities of a great CEO—extremely focuses, observant, and a consummate professional, while at the same time being easy with a smile, kind, and generous of spirit. This shows up every time you visit the restaurant. Most obviously, perhaps, in the way each staff member seems to genuinely enjoy their job. Donna, Caroline, Jose, and all the others—the service they give is impeccable—and they all embody the same gracious spirit as Sandra herself does.

In a time where 85% of all new restaurants fail within the first year, it’s no surprise that Suzanne’s Cuisine has beaten the odds. We’re especially lucky they have been able to thrive in a town as small as Ojai. If you ask either of these talented restaurateurs to tell

you the secret of their success, their answers are immediate—and opposite. Sandra insists it's her mother's food, while Suzanne adds: "None of this would be possible if it weren't for Sandra."