

Food & Home In the Kitchen

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Family-style success

Suzanne's Cuisine: Ojai's culinary gem

In Ojai, one of the better culinary invitations you could hope for would be Sunday supper at the home of restaurateur Susanne Roll. It would be spontaneous, inventive, crafted from whatever ingredients that are in her garden or her cupboard and it would most certainly be an elegant meal celebrating family and great food. The art of cooking for Roll is just that . . . art. Intuitive, raw and organic. In 14-plus years as a professional chef she has never followed a recipe. Dozens of publishers have approached her to write cookbooks, but she politely turns them down. "They all want structured methods and measurements which I can't give them," she laughs. "I just don't cook like that. There can be countless ways to make a particular dish but I won't know where I'm going with it until I taste and inspect the available ingredients . . . that's all there is to good cooking, just really good ingredients."

Suzanne's Cuisine is an appropriate name for her restaurant because it really is Suzanne Roll's creation. Her recipes and cooking methods are not borrowed from other restaurants or books of celebrity chefs. For one-of-a-kind delights featuring simple, seasonal fare. "I try to cook like my Aunt Rose," says Roll. "She made great meals out of nothing and I try to keep this in mind when I'm designing special menus for the restaurant. It's amazing how creative a dish can be if you use the best of what's available, when you combine flavors in non-traditional ways and are not tied to the ingredients listed in a book."

Some of the favorite combinations on the summer menu include a grilled Alaskan halibut served with an avocado tomatilla salsa. Grilled tandoori lamb chops with mint couscous. Roasted pork medallions with apple chutney and new potatoes; a salad of shaved fennel

and toasted beets served with a yogurt-dill vinaigrette. The list of simple yet perfectly crafted flavors goes on as do her daily specials which change with the seasons, all at prices far below what you might expect. The wine list is extensive and includes varietals produced with grapes home-grown and harvested on Roll's ranch.

Sandra Moore, Roll's daughter and partner, oversees the general operations and financial part of the business. "We're a team and it's a great partnership," says Moore. "Suzanne handles the kitchen and the line cooks and I take care of the rest." From payroll to advertising to training the wait staff, the daily items on Moor's to-do list number in the hundreds, any one of which could give the restaurant poor marks if not done professionally. As an MBA graduate from the University of Chicago, Moore says she's been well trained in the details of growing a business, but she never expected to work at Suzanne's this long. She had intentions of using her degree in the retail food industry and possibly open a Trader Joe's in the Chicago area. "Mom's expertise is in the cooking area, not business," she smiles. "At first I was just trying to give the restaurant a direction and increase the sales of some of her homemade jams, mustards and infused oils. I thought I'd spend a year or two and move on, but the more I concentrated on the running of the restaurant the more Suzanne was able to concentrate on the food and the business took off. After a while I really started to appreciate the unique family legacy we've created and I've been here ever since."

The work ethic of the partnership can be seen in every part of the experience. Roll often travels the entire county in search of the best farmer's market produce and spends hours with her line cooks to ensure each dish is prepared with her philosophy. Moore makes sure the wait staff and front of the house is a well-oiled machine. The kitchen and grounds are spotless. Vendors go out of their way to please because they're treated in kind. It's no wonder the restaurant receives one of the highest ratings every year from the ZAGAT Survey, not to mention a consistent positive chatter from regulars, all of which has put Suzanne's Cuisine (and Ojai for that matter) on the culinary must-try list.