

Los Angeles Times

Rolling Right Along

Restaurant Review *Suzanne's Cuisine*

The owner, a newcomer to the business has quickly made this the best eatery in the Ojai Valley.

*David B. Goldman, Los Angeles Times
March 25, 1993*

Suzanne's Cuisine is, in my not-so-humble opinion, the best restaurant in the Ojai Valley.

It may be the best restaurant in Ventura County, but that's the sort of opinion that often provokes debate, as do nearly all opinions about restaurants and their food.

You wouldn't know from the exterior of the building, set back from the avenue, that Suzanne's is worth much. The restaurant is in a remodeled house, and even the dining room is nothing to get excited about. There's a very small wine bar on the left; you can sort of peek into the kitchen behind that and, on cool evenings, there's a nice fire in the fireplace by the door.

Outside, where I've most enjoyed eating at Suzanne's, is a modest patio, a fountain and an herb garden. There's also a fireplace out there, and heaters when the fireplace won't do the job.

But, the whole place, inside and out, takes on a new mien when Suzanne Roll's very good food starts rolling – don't bother to pardon the pun – of the kitchen. Roll has done a

rare thing. She was, apparently, an enthusiastic but amateur cook, as well as a professional residential kitchen designer, before she opened the restaurant in November.

She has never operated in a commercial kitchen, which is hard to believe considering what she is doing in this one. Roll's daughter, Sandra Shinall, who used to work at the well-known Rockenwagner in Los Angeles, is responsible for the expertise in the front of the house. The servers she oversees are professional, cordial and impatient with the occasional mistakes in the kitchen.

Not that there are many.

The bread, most of which is baked on the premises, is outstanding. The heavy rolls usually have just a slight sourdough flavor, and are sometimes covered with crispy seeds and, occasionally, hazelnuts.

At the appetizer level, it's sometimes hard to make a selection. They've got an outstanding crab and corn cake (\$8) sitting in a cream lemon sauce. Large and firm, the very lightly breaded crab is a great match for the lemon sauce.

One evening, it seems, Roll's husband had been trout fishing. The result was a small, boned trout, charred with rosemary and garlic, placed on a bed of arugula (lots of the lettuces and some vegetables are grown at the Roll ranch in the Upper Ojai) in a vinaigrette sauce (\$9). A more appetizing dish, or a more tender trout, I've rarely tasted.

The chicken salad is made with smoked chicken, served over mixed green, with blue cheese and toasted walnuts, dressed in a walnut vinaigrette. A generous portion is served up, the general rule at Suzanne's.

Squab (\$19), raised locally, comes grilled and meaty (if that word can be used with squab) in a reduced port wine sauce. It is rich without being too heavy.

Nearly all of the side dishes are especially good, particularly the cabbage, made with butter and a few sour cherries. On the side are also thin slices of fried sweet potatoes.

Perhaps the best dish of all, for those of us who are seafood lovers, is Suzanne's bouillabaisse (\$20), a special that makes you salivate just looking at it. On the side is a cup of grated Gruyere cheese and another of *rouille* – a paste of red peppers – plus the usual garlic toast. The dish itself is in a rich broth with lots of fresh clams, shrimp, scallops, mussels, crawfish and fish. None of these is overcooked. The bouillabaisse alone can be a full meal, making you wish that you'd gone a bit easier on the appetizers.

Pork tenderloin (\$18) is an outstanding meat dish, and one of the plate's highlights is the zucchini flowers, stuffed with a mild, creamy goat cheese. They melt in your mouth. The meat is moist, tender and always cooked just as you order it.

I could go on. I could talk about the perfect Atlantic salmon (\$17), a large moist piece of fish cooked with a ginger sauce. Or the tricolor pasta with rock shrimp and artichoke hearts (\$14), a bit rich if you're following it with dessert, but creamy, and full of textures and seasonings.

The thick, grilled loin lamb chops (\$20) on the special menu are soaked first in milk, then in a wine marinade.

And I could talk about the desserts.

One night our waitress, apologetically and after we'd waited a while for dessert, came out and said the warm chocolate tart with white coffee sauce wasn't "coming out right." I was disappointed, but I also appreciate that sort of candor.

A night or two later, when we did get the tart, it turned out to be one of the better chocolate desserts I've had of late. It had just a trace of a burnt effect, crusty on the edge, and soft and rich in the middle. Most important, it was not too sweet.

Nearly as good is the hazelnut chocolate mousse cake with crème *Anplaise* (\$6), which we'd had in place of the failed chocolate tart. The cake is also rich, almost spongy, but firm and gooey and, again, not too sweet.

There are a couple of tiny negatives, including a pet peeve of mine. When the waitress reads off the daily specials, she does not give the prices. This would be all right if the prices were no more than other prices on the menu. However, virtually all of the specials are more – even though only a bit more – than menu dishes.

Any day now, Suzanne's will be opening for lunch, with a different menu.