

Urban Lucca Café Grows Following in Suburban Mall

By Fifi Chao

ORANGE COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL STAFF

Lucca Café–Deli–Wine Bar in Quail Hill Village Center in Irvine has been open for only six weeks and already it has a following.

We live close by and have had only lunches there since dinners won't be served till mid-September, but the experience has been rewarding.

Husband and wife owners, Cathy and Elliott Pavlos, both are architects. They met when she was the associate director of the school of architecture at the University of Texas. Elliott, a member of the National Association of Architectural Accrediting Board based in Washington, D.C., was at the university assessing the architectural program for accreditation.

The two married a few years ago and Cathy's second great love—delicious and healthy food—took flight. Thus Lucca Café, an urban concept in a suburban center, was born.

For the next couple of weeks, the menu is restricted to breakfast and lunch. There are two well-trained chefs de cuisine: Tom Curran, chef in the daytime, and Paul Jacobsen, who is the designated evening chef currently working on refining what already sounds to me like a very interesting dinner menu.

I was delightfully surprised to hear that the gourmet specialist is James Drakeford, a guy I knew years ago and had lost track of.

James is from England, trained at Harrods. I first met him when he represented Petrossian caviar, purported to be the world's best caviar purveyor. Then, he began sharing his knowledge of cheese, charcuterie and specialty foods with restaurants.

The whole menu is based on the use of healthful and high quality ingredients: certified Angus beef, free-range turkey, hormone-free chicken, wild salmon and locally grown organic produce.

Breakfast piques the curiosity with goat cheese and fresh herb omelet, French toast made with their own orange pecan brioche, croissants that are actually shaped in France and flown in to be baked fresh here, frittata and quiche and a breakfast pita.

A superb assortment of just-baked Danish style pastries tests your willpower. From steel-cut oatmeal to lox derived from fresh wild salmon, egg and pancake items to Mediterranean sausage and hot baguettes and satisfying Lavazza Italian coffee, the first meal of the day can be pretty delightful.

At lunch, the menu shifts to a bit of global fare. There are deli style plates allowing a variety of tastes.

They have cheeses of all textures and strengths of flavor. Don't miss the mimolette, a hard-style cheddar cheese from France just now being imported for us. Bresaola is air-dried beef that delivers a mouth-filling taste sensation.



**EXECUTIVE
DINING**
Fifi Chao

There's a special mortadella deli meat that hasn't been available for 40 years in the U.S. but James now has managed to acquire it.

There are two or three soups of the day, served with their own fluffy herbed biscuit. Salads are ample and have French, Greek Italian and American connotations.

Several pasta dishes have interesting personalities and they all come with a Lucca salad and crostini.

I'm insisting you have the Ravioloni Aperti. It's a plate-filling ravioli sheet under which is a grilled chicken and spinach combo mingling with a fresh pesto sauce. Add the topping of classic béchamel sauce speckled with quality parmesan cheese and it became a dining indulgence that suited my busy palate.

Sandwiches are served on an earthy ciabatta roll and come with a lovely citrus and herb couscous or a small Lucca salad. I dive right for the leg of lamb or the wild salmon sandwich, but there are also choices of a meatball hero, sautéed eggplant, a BLT with spinach sitting in for the commonplace lettuce part and a tender tri-tip, among others.

I hardly can wait for the upcoming dinners in about two weeks. The proposed menu promises some real treats:

Kobe beef sliders paired with foie gras and a taste of some elegant cheese, wild salmon stuffed with gremolata and wrapped in grape leaves, halibut with braised endive and butternut squash, Muscovy duck with orange sauce and a Maui onion crepe, pork tenderloin with corn custard and herb-crusting baby lamb chops.

We'll be able to have flights of taste for some things—shooters of soups, for instance, where you will get a flight of different ones. Pastas too can be served in a flight of flavors, allowing for a trio of tastes on one plate.

For dessert, the unique one is a bell-shaped feuilletée flown in fresh from Brooklyn. Called sfogliatelle, it is many layers of crispy, paper-thin pastry filled with ricotta cheese and some dried, chopped fruits and baked here. It can also serve as an ideal breakfast pastry.

Cafe it might be, but Lucca is an inviting space where casual friendliness quickly meets a few chic big city elements. The bar features more than 30 wines by the glass. I appreciate the choice of 2.5-ounce or 6-ounce pours of wine for \$5 to \$14.

Just inside the doors is a food display case that gives the deli part of the name meaning. Take home some of the ready to serve food such as the pre-packaged slices of lamb—enough for two for around \$8. Get a bit of special cheese, one of the small loaves of ciabatta bread, an interesting salad mix, a few marinated olives and a pastry to share and you have a tasty meal without any work.