

Lucca's Latest Take on Fine Dining: Take-Out Service

By Fifi Chao

ORANGE COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL STAFF

Once in a while, a small, family-owned restaurant comes along that has a big culinary voice and a sense of place and time that makes it very compelling.

Lucca in Irvine's Quail Hill Village Center makes the cut as a lovely cosmopolitan cafe, a deli and a worthy destination for some fine dining. And just lately, there's something else about Lucca keeping us happy: We can now pick up the most interesting dinners to go for only \$11.95 to \$16.95.

It's a very unusual story as to how Lucca came about. Owners Cathy and Elliott Pavlos not long ago were entrenched in other careers. They are architects—at least they were architects. Cathy also has a Ph.D. in environmental analysis and design and was associate director of the architecture department at the University of Texas, where she spent 25 years. She and Elliott met when he—a member of the Washington, D.C.-based National Architectural Accrediting Board—turned up at the university to assess the architectural program for accreditation.

They both had another deep-seated passion other than architecture—quality food, which they enjoyed preparing themselves and finding in restaurants. That passion provided the seed of provocation that turned into Lucca.

They had a stash of recipes that they'd worked out during the years and a vision of what they'd like a restaurant to look like, should they ever have one. That opportunity came when Quail Hill Village Center was opened in late summer of 2005. They were offered a space on the end of the center that was closest to the gate into exclusive Shady Canyon.

The resulting Lucca now gives us all a dining experience that is tremendously appealing in food, wine, surroundings, service and affordability.

Before we even talk about menus and sit-down dining—because you know I'll get to that—I have to tell you about perhaps the best food to go program of them all. It's new and it's called Lucca2Go meals. It now is making dining at home so much easier for many of us.

These are complete gourmet dinners, packaged and ready to go. The restaurant has a monthly calendar with a meal for every day. We just call 48 hours in advance and tell them the number of orders we need and whether we want them cold (to be finished at home) or hot (ready to eat). Orders have to be picked up by 7 p.m.

One family was so impressed with the take-out food that they gave Elliott a credit card and told him to ring up 20 meals for the month, thus taking care of their at home dining needs for every weeknight.

This month, some of the main courses are veal scaloppine with lemon cream and artichokes, blackened wild salmon, filet mignon with wild mushrooms, free-range turkey with sausage stuffing, spicy pork tenderloin, veal marsala, braised lamb shank, rib eye steak, lasagna and filet of sole stuffed with crab. All meals are complete with salad or vegetable and starch. It's almost ridiculous to pass up this lovingly prepared food that saves so much of our own time.



**EXECUTIVE
DINING**
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When it comes to sit-down dining, the menu is sociable. It is based on small plates, built on the best quality ingredients Cathy can find. It is good to order the small plates in “flights,” like wines to be compared. Select from different areas of the menu—cheeses, charcuterie, pastas, greens, meats, seafoods and vegetables—and share them with others at the table. If you are taken by some particular dish and want a full entree portion, just ask the server to double the order.

The menus change several times a year because Cathy, as the chef, wants to use what nature provides in season. And, she features the best products she can find. Those fine items extend to what’s in the deli case: artisanal, handcrafted cheeses and deli meats, plus a variety of olives and other important condiments. These can be eaten at the restaurant or bought for take out.

On weekends, brunch is served. You can build your own breakfast combo or order a la carte entrees. Since their coffee is so good (made from a special blend of beans not available to the public), just to have an omelet and some of their fresh pastries with my coffee is fine with me.

Wonderful cheeses from the deli case come from France, Spain, America, Sardinia, Australia and Italy. They range from cow and sheep’s milk cheeses to goat milk and blue cheeses. And, there are the amazing charcuterie meats. A few of them are culatello from New York’s Salumeria Biellese (the heart of American prosciutto made from organically raised Berkshire pigs), amazingly silky prosciutto and speck (applewood-smoked heart of prosciutto) from La Quercia in Iowa and a trio of salamis and coppa from Salumi in Seattle (owned by celebrity chef Mario Batali’s father). From Fra’ Mani in Berkeley, she gets three more signature style salamis.

The cheese and cold cuts were just too much for us to pass up at a recent lunch and we managed to taste many, almost making a complete meal of them.

A good way to taste a lot of antipasti is to stop by any Thursday through Sunday evening when Cathy puts out an impressive array of goodies from the deli case and foods that she makes in the kitchen.

It’s all set out on the granite counter beside the deli case and it sure does turn things into a European style taste extravaganza. An assortment of vegetables will always be well represented.

On various nights, you might encounter grilled asparagus, roasted eggplant or peppers, caramelized fennel, leeks, Greek salad with feta, rapini and grilled artichokes and mushrooms. It is the season for fresh zucchini blossoms and Cathy has been stuffing them with savories and using them on the antipasti table.

The lunch menu has sandwiches such as a lamb pita, tri tip beef with caramelized onions and a few other signature sandwiches. Of the entree plates, I would urge you to have the Sunday Sauce Pasta. This is Cathy’s grandmother’s recipe for meat ragu sauce with truly superb meatballs and a hint of Italian sausage. Seafood mingled with linguine in a pesto cream sauce is another fine offering. Each day, there’s also a list of lunch specials that cover two soups of the day, a couple of freshly baked pastries, a quiche of the day, a pasta dish, a wrap and a salad of the moment.

The dinner menu has a dozen suggested cheese and charcuterie plates that prove to be terrific appetizers. The salad of grilled stone fruit with a mix of baby greens, blue cheese, pecan brittle and apricot vinaigrette is perfect at this time of year. Organic greens, imported olives and heirloom tomatoes from their own garden or those from special purveyors appear in various other salads.

Wild salmon with champagne sauce, ahi with risotto cake and oven-roasted halibut are worthy seafood dishes on the evening menu. Veal scaloppine with artichoke hearts, Spanish paella, all-natural pork tenderloin complemented with lingonberries, hangar steak, baby rack of lamb and free-range chicken are other possibilities. It's good to find a mixed grill and here it rises to the occasion as Angus beef, baby lamb chop and Mediterranean chicken sausage with an array of pretty elegant sauces and complements.

As at lunch, there's a list of specials each evening. A recent rundown found a rich shrimp bisque, locally caught sea bass wrapped in grape leaves, a four-pasta plate, five skewers of meats and poultry on yet another plate, a soufflé made with artisanal goat cheese and market fresh apricots and pears poached in sauternes and stuffed with cheese and walnuts among the choices. To say that they are ambitious in presenting a menu and all these specials of the day is an understatement.

Cathy and the kitchen crew don't wind down when the savory dishes for the day are prepped. They show just as much enthusiasm for the desserts that also comprise notable tastes. You might find ice creams made of unexpected ingredients, tarts and cakes that make you think you're in Europe and creamy concoctions that verge on elegance.

With all this good food, you will want wine. The list is a friendly thing with many of the international wines offered in 2.5- or 6-ounce pours. Just like having small plates of food encourages more tasting, the wines can be tried in flights as well.

Lucca is friendly from the moment you enter. The greetings from the staff make you feel appreciated and the attractive décor spells relaxation. It has appealing elements like glazed sage green walls, a stone fireplace and a curvy wood structure at the entrance that serves as wine storage and niches for artifacts and then becomes a designated space for nice banquettes on the concave side facing the dining room. Some of the structural fundamentals help the room change moods from daylight pleasant to downright romantic in the evening.

The open kitchen is fronted by a granite-topped bar, a nice place for eating or sipping some wine and possibly having a small plate of food.

Lucca may be part of a shopping center, but it's in its own building and though in step with the overall mall exteriors, the architectural interest inside is a nice surprise. Making me happier than anything is the good feedback that I continue to get from those I've already told about Lucca. They are just doing so many things right and it is certainly an extension of the warm personalities of Cathy and Elliott.

AT A GLANCE: Lucca Café-Deli-Wine Bar

Address: 6507 Quail Hill Parkway

Quail Hill Village Center, Irvine

Phone: (949) 725-1773

Hours: Saturday and Sunday brunch 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.; lunch Monday through Friday 11 a.m. to 2



p.m.; dinner nightly from 5 p.m.; deli 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily

Cost: brunch items \$3.95 to \$10.95; lunch entrees \$7.95 to \$13.95; dinner entrees \$9 to \$17; Lucca2Go meals \$11.95 to \$16.95

Wine policy: \$10 corkage and for take-out wine, \$10 off the wine list price

