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NEW JERSEY WEEKLY DESK

RESTAURANTS; Not Your Father's Pasta

By **KARLA COOK**

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Lambertville -- IT was Saturday night and the air was a spring caress. I was sure that we would have a very long wait for a table at Rick's, where the only place to lean against is a boxed radiator, and the narrow doorway to the dining rooms offers an up-close view of boisterous parties sucking up pasta or sharing house-made tiramisu.

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But we were in luck. There was only one name ahead of us on the sign-up sheet, and I could see that coffee cups were being drained and cash was on the table. We were seated quickly and in the space of one visit saw several parties accept either hugs from the server, visits from the chef or matching quickie meals. That is the nice thing about Rick's. It's a homey, reasonably priced neighborhood place for mostly simple food. But it's also a meeting and greeting place, and for certain top-ranking officials in Governor McGreevey's administration, it is a favored place to unwind on Friday nights -- as long as not one word of business is uttered. When you are there, sharing in the good feelings, it occurs to you if you do not live in Lambertville that maybe you should.

Alex Cormier, 36, and Dana Ruggiero, 35, bought the place from their friend Rick several months ago, after Mr. Cormier's promise to help in the kitchen for a couple of months stretched into five years at the stove and Mr. Cormier and Ms. Ruggiero's relationship blossomed. They now have wedding plans.

Mr. Cormier skipped cooking school in favor of apprenticeships and finds inspiration in the French cooking encyclopedia "Larousse Gastronomique"; Ms. Ruggiero works the front of the house.

The 50-seat restaurant occupies a narrow 1886 townhouse about a block from the main thoroughfare of this river town. It is a retro place, with linoleum on the floors, knotty pine on the walls and wipe-clean red-and-white checked plastic on the tables. The menu is retro as well. Listed on both wall-mounted blackboards and inserted into transparent standup placards on each table, it includes mostly solid, rather regular Italian and Italian-American fare.

But Mr. Cormier says that it is the specials that entertain him. It is evident -- they are well made and particularly flavorful. They also unexpectedly elevate the place to something more than a spaghetti house.

Consider, for instance: the koulibiaca of salmon, a rich compilation from 19th century Russia involving a sautéed salmon fillet, fresh dill, a bit of garlic, fresh spinach and hardboiled eggs, all wrapped in puff pastry and baked, then surrounded by a sauce of white wine, butter, dill and white vinegar. Or there are the ethereally tender and luscious sweetbreads in a brown



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sauce studded with cherries. But those -- along with foie gras and veal kidneys that were served on nights that I didn't visit -- are specials and are available infrequently.

The first thing to order off the menu is the bowl of Prince Edward Island mussels, in a garlicky sauce of white wine, olive oil and parsley. Plump, juicy and too hot to hold for long, each one I had was better than the last, and the meal would have been complete with just bread for sopping the sauce and a vegetable side dish. (Vegetables are not on the menu, though Mr. Cormier says he prepares them for those who ask.)

Salads have potential, generally unrealized. The field greens salad with goat cheese and hazelnuts is more parts than parcel, not quite holding together. And a recent addition to the menu, the endive and watercress salad, with Roquefort, beets and walnuts, could be delicious, but the first requirement would be to deliver the goods as promised. I found no watercress in my salad, only mesclun and slices of apple with plentiful curds of cheese. The beets, if they were fresh, had been cooked far too long. The dressing, too, was so sharp with mustard that it ruined the salad.

The antipasto plate was nicely presented, with a generous serving of roasted peppers topping a dessert plate full of sliced cheese, deli meats and olives with pepperoncini, though the out-of-season tomato slices reduced the quality of the dish by more than half. In the parmigiana category, a clear standout was the portobello, with its earthy undertones working well against the dairy sweet cheese and the slight sharpness of a rosemary-balsamic marinade.

As for pastas, basics were the best. The spinach ravioli was more interesting than the cheese; the spaghetti with either meatballs or sausage and peppers will satisfy that carbohydrate craving; the penne vodka does the job in that department as well.

The shrimp fra diavolo, named as a special one night but listed right on the menu along with other items also called specials, was more dastardly than devilish, with an overabundance of garlic that overwhelmed the dish and obscured the sweetness of nicely cooked shrimp.

Penne pasta, with prosciutto, roasted garlic, shallots and mushrooms, was well balanced and pretty on one visit, its shards of bright green asparagus a salute to the season. On another visit, it seemed more like a big bowl of leftovers, with the occasionally crunchy piece of pasta that must have come from a run through the broiler to warm it up.

For dessert, pick the moist and not-too-sweet chocolate chip banana cake or the house-made ice cream, sorbet, or tiramisu, which is made with mascarpone and raw eggs. Each will send you out with a smile and the desire to either call a Lambertville real estate agent or persuade your favorite low-key chef to open a neighborhood joint in your town.

Rick's Restaurant
19 South Main Street, Lambertville
(609) 397-0051

GOOD

ATMOSPHERE -- Linoleum floors, plastic-covered tables and high noise level at dinnertime.

SERVICE -- Unflappable, with oversights quickly corrected.

SMOKING -- No smoking allowed.

WINE LIST -- Bring your own.

RECOMMENDED DISHES -- Mussels in white wine sauce, portobello parmigiana, salmon kouloubiaca, sweetbreads, scallops over potatoes, spinach ravioli, spaghetti with

meatballs, tiramisu, chocolate chip banana cake, ice creams and sorbets.

PRICE RANGE -- Appetizers, \$4 to \$10; pastas, \$8 to \$16; main dishes, \$14 to \$23; specials, \$6 to \$24; desserts, \$5 to \$6.

HOURS -- Dinner, Wednesday through Saturday, 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. and on Sunday, 4 p.m. to 9 p.m.

CREDIT CARDS -- Not accepted; only cash and checks.

RESERVATIONS -- Accepted only for parties of five or more.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS -- The restaurant is not wheelchair accessible, but in temperate weather the outdoor dining space will accommodate a wheelchair.

IF YOU GO -- Lambertville is on the Delaware River, just south of U.S. Highway 202. To get there, take 29 South, then turn west onto Bridge Street. Turn south onto Main Street. Rick's is about two blocks down on the right.

RATINGS -- Poor, Fair, Satisfactory, Good, Very Good, Excellent, Extraordinary. Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

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