

primetime

DECEMBER 2005

dining

ROBERT GORDON

RICK'S



RICK HAS LEFT THE building. You won't find Rick at Rick's. You will find good Italian food in keeping with the eatery's tagline: "good Italian food and much more." The Italian food is tasty. I'm not downplaying it. But the restaurant finds its groove in the "much more" part of the slogan. That's where this traditional neighborhood fav' separates from the rest of the pack of linoleum tiled, red and white checkered tablecloth Italian neighborhood restaurants.

The mastermind of the "much more" stuff is Alex Cormier, Rick's replacement. Call Alex the Doc Hollywood

of Lambertville. Alex worked in a succession of top-flight restaurants in Washington, Manhattan, Dallas, Hawaii, and Philly—posh palaces like the Fountain restaurant at the Four Seasons in Philly, Montrachet, Johnny K's, and the Watergate in Washington, and Allison on Dominick in Manhattan.

He came to Lambertville with the intent of remaining a few months. Alex was called in to spell the then-eponymous owner of Rick's, Rick Buscavage, while Rick recuperated from back problems. Enter the woman in the story, Dana Ruggiero. Here's a little ditty 'bout Alex and Dana: Alex and Dana met; Dana lived in Lambertville; Alex lingered; they fell in love; they married; Alex decided to buy Rick's; Alex put down roots in Lambertville. He's been there more than five years at this point. Doc Lambertville.

When you go to Rick's, Dana is likely to greet you. She patrols the front of this homey 1886 townhouse. She'll probably introduce herself as Dana Ruggiero. "I still can't get used to saying 'Dana Cormier,'" she confesses sheepishly.

Dana does a good share of the greeting at Rick's, although Alex is hardly anchored to the kitchen. He makes frequent forays into the dining area. He knows many guests personally. Arguably the restaurant boasts Lambertville's largest army of regulars. Rick's has been a standby for many years in its quiet nook of Lambertville. Italian restaurants tend to earn that neighborhood-favorite mantle because their prices allow consumption sans consumption/obliteration of savings. That's pretty much how Rick's forged its rep. Rick Buscavage started it. Cormier continues the tradition. Homey hearty pastas hover around the \$14 mark with portion sizes you can generally pencil in for tomorrow's dinner as well.

But what's a guy who carved out such a killer resume doing here? After all, Alex used to spend his days toiling to please the refined palates of clients like George Bush's buddy Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan. So what's he doing serving up classic red-gravy Italian dishes in a sleepy river town? Alex says he cooks up ten gallons of spaghetti sauce daily for that "good Italian food." That's not the kick for Cormier. The kick for him is on the wall. Check out the blackboard. Alex keeps his culinary chops sharp with daily

RICK'S

19 South Main Street, Lambertville, NJ
(609) 397-0051

Hours:	Dinner daily at 5 PM; Sunday 4:30
Credit cards:	accept major cards
Reservations:	suggested
Cuisine:	The restaurant's tagline "Good Italian food and much more" doesn't do justice to the impressive sweep of upscale food offered daily on the blackboard specials. The regular menu is solid Italian bistrosque fare, but the daily specials harbor the chef's flashiest culinary chops.
Atmosphere:	The 1886 row home harbors Victorian townhouse charm. The interior is retro fifties wherein a bustling band of locals add kinetic force to the bistro feel.
Service:	From Chef Cormier to Dana Ruggiero Cormier through the loyal staff, everyone is here to please—to enjoy their night and make you do the same.
Prices:	(11) Salads & Starters \$5-\$12 (11) Parmigiana \$15-\$23 (3) Pastas \$8-\$17
Website:	www.ricksitalian.com

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specials that draw on his experience in upscale kitchens. His daily specials rock.

It's kind of funky to be flanked by fifties-era knotty pine paneling while dining on foie gras with cherries, or veal kidneys, or choucroute with pork shoulder and currants, or yummy lobster (or ahi tuna) spring rolls, or caramelized scallops over garlic mashed potatoes, or a Russian version of salmon that traps dill, spinach, and hardboiled eggs in a puff pastry. That's far from the full litany but you get the idea. Those dishes are anything but standard Italian. So despite the fact that the regular Italian menu is fine, foodies migrate to Rick's with an eye toward the blackboard. They're bound to see something that strikes their fancy each day.

As for the neighborhood Italian regular menu, selections run the gamut of Italian staples. In the Starters category, awash in gutsy red or white wine sauce, mussels and clams burst with freshness. A huge antipasto brims with roasted peppers, tomato slices, pepperoni, and sliced cheeses. The parmigiana dishes are outstanding. Fresh, succulent eggplant parmesan notches up in taste because it powers up on subtleties. In this case, it's the delicate, scrumptious crunch of the skin that the chef coaxes out of the eggplant. The lusty juices of portobello mushrooms add interest and complexity to parmesan. This dish pleases more than just the palate of the veggie-lover. Shrimp over linguini doused in your choice of marinara, fra diavolo, oil & garlic, or alfredo sauce scores on texture and spicy taste. Among the pastas, the gnocchi is a must-try. Mated with duck, sun-dried tomatoes, and mushrooms, the tender potato pasta adds mellow consistency to a well balanced dish. Penne vodka kicks, while angel hair pasta is a dish for chillin'. Spinach and cheese ravioli, fettuccine alfredo and other pastas round out the menu.

For a tiny café, Rick's covers lots of culinary terrain. They deliver on the promise of Italian and much more. Still, since it's now the house of Alex, why not call it Alex's Restaurant. The tagline is ready made and appropriate: You can get anything you want at Alex's Restaurant. ■