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Friday, Oct 01, 2004

Rick Nichols

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Food

A cozy French-Italian connection quietly coalesces

Rick's in Lambertville still serves its signature pastas, but chef and new owner **Alex Cormier** has been mixing in some fine-dining touches.

By Rick Nichols
Inquirer Columnist

For decades, the knotty-pine-paneled, red-gravy cafe in Lambertville was Phil and Dan's, then Rick's, and now it belongs to Alex Cormier, who may decide to reflag it - but not quite yet.

It is a touchstone on Main Street, which is not the river town's main street - that would be Bridge Street - and you'd best not mess casually with success (or such tentative success as has reappeared for the dining scene since the bridge to New Hope reopened in the spring).

So Alex Cormier, 37, finds himself betwixt and between, grafting his surefooted signature French bistro cookery onto a menu of unabashedly straightforward, big-plate pastas that, over the years, have been Rick's stock-in-trade.

At first, he confesses, he was a little impatient. He is a child of Bridesburg (of a former French POW father and a Russian refugee mother) who by his teens was working under Philadelphia's first wave of French chefs - Jean-Francois Taquet at La Truffe and the Four Seasons; Bruce Lim at his then-fledgling Ciboulette.

He cooked briefly in Hawaii and then was a private chef in Dallas for - really - Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan (that's right, the Bush buddy and Saudi Arabian ambassador with the cameo in *Fahrenheit 9/11*), then opened Alex on South, his own bistro on South Street.

So, yes, when he resurfaced here almost four years ago - after gigs at a short-lived Philadelphia venture called Cibo and lucrative catering in New York - it was just to help his friend Rick Buscavage (the "Rick" of Rick's) get by while Buscavage recovered from some debilitating back trouble.

He would do the red gravy dutifully and be on his way. Except that he met his now-fiancee, Dana Ruggiero, who was (and still is) working the front of the house and, well, he decided the veal parm wasn't half bad. So he stayed on, bought the folksy place, and split the personality of the menu.

You can still order spaghetti and meatballs (Cormier makes 10 gallons of sauce a day) or nowadays - as half of the customers do - nightly specials: say, sweetbreads with cherries, or turbot, or foie gras.

I have always had a soft spot for this less-traveled stretch of Lambertville, a bit more attuned to locals, home to an easygoing, classic cozy bar at the Swan Hotel that features great burgers and a fine, to-heck-with-Atkins mashed potato/red onion pizza.

IMAGES



MICHAEL PLUNKETT / Inquirer

Alex Cormier has brought French bistro cooking to a red-gravy house.

Rick's

19 S. Main St.
Lambertville
609-397-0051

And I've always had a soft spot for Cormier's personalized, full-flavored cookery, which as the weather turns will gravitate toward the choucroute he does with pork shoulder and currants, and hearty cassoulets, and fricassees of chicken, and - because the pastas (about \$14) keep food costs down - the fancier specials.

One warm night when I drop in, though, the chunky, crispy lobster spring rolls (sometimes they're made with rare, sushi-grade tuna) are propped above a cool, tangy Jersey tomato salad dressed with peanut sauce. The entree specials include beautiful caramelized, king-size sweet sea scallops over creamy garlic mashed potatoes, and a subtle asparagus-latticed salmon manicotti (\$19) slowly baked in fresh herbs, olive oil, lemon juice and chicken stock.

It makes me long for the days when Cormier improvised nightly at Cibo, sending out whimsical tastes of duck confit and sweet corn on seeded toasts, or the fork-tender braised short ribs he cooked for the Saudi prince.

Or, finally, those amazing crabcakes tweaked with jalapeno, lemon and capers.

Except here they are again at Rick's, well-tanned and jumbo lump, gracing the red-checkered tablecloth next to me not far from a steaming platter of eggplant parmigiana.

Could it be that Alex Cormier has chosen well by not choosing - serving one tradition as he tries to cultivate another, assuring that, for the time being off the main street in Lambertville, you can still have your cake and eat it, too.

Contact columnist Rick Nichols at 215-854-2715 or rnichols@phillynews.com. Read his recent work at <http://go.philly.com/ricknichols>. Rick's 19 S. Main St. Lambertville 609-397-0051



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