

DINING OUT

Rick's goes beyond tried and true

FINE DINING

Rick's

19 South Main St., Lambertville.
Dinner: 5-9:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 4:30-8:30 p.m. Sundays. Closed Mondays. BYOW. Major credit cards. Casual dress. No wheelchair access. Reservations for parties of four or more: (609) 397-0051.

★★ 1/2

BY CODY KENDALL
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Rick's attracts patrons from well beyond Lambertville, yet this pine-paneled spot still has the comfy feeling of a neighborhood gathering place.

Red- and white-checked tablecloths, informal but caring service and moderate prices are not the only drawing cards, though. The basic Italian menu, including the likes of chicken Parmesan (\$17) and penne vodka (\$15), primarily is just a fall-back for those who want something tried and true. The real beauty of Rick's is the ever-changing lineup of specials printed on boards around the restaurant. That's where you'll find more interesting choices, from made-on-the-premises excellent pumpkin cannelloni with sage Alfredo sauce (\$21) to hearty bacon-wrapped cheddar cheese meatloaf (\$18). Depending on the night, you might even see foie gras or sweetbreads listed, quite a contrast to the pastas and red sauce that are the regulars' comfort food.

Kitchen-trained chef/owner Alex Cormier, whose résumé in-

cludes working as a private chef for a Saudi prince and stints in high-caliber Philadelphia and New York restaurants as well as Harriette's in Princeton, returned to Lambertville four years ago. He had run Alex on South in the Delaware River town during the mid-1990s before heading out of state.

When he took over Rick's, founded during the 1930s as "a mom-and-pop place," he was interested in having it evolve, but not too much.

"I want to keep it family and fun the way it's been. I just wanted to change the food while keeping the base on it, the Italian that's been going on for years," he said.

Hummus in red pepper oil made a nice dip for the bread as we decided what to eat. Though our primary interest was the specials, we took a particular liking to one of the basic menu items, gnocchi (\$18) tossed with pieces of duck, sun-dried tomatoes, herbs and mushrooms. The slightly different twist on the gnocchi gave this rustic dish status, while offering us satisfaction on a far grander scale than we had expected.

Beef brasciole (\$23), meat rolled with bread crumbs and roasted peppers fra diavolo, had the appropriate zing and substance to make it an interesting special. A beet salad (\$7) with creamy sauce was a good way to start the meal, but if you want to choose from the regular menu, its offerings include a Caesar salad (\$8), ravioli sampler (\$6) and Margherita pizza (\$8).

While the quality of the items



TYLER BARRICK/FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Dana Cormier, co-owner of Rick's in Lambertville, talks with patrons. Cormier owns the restaurant with her husband Alex, who's also the chef.

listed on the board generally was quite good, crabcakes (\$24) were adequate though not exceptional. The addition of made-on-the-premises cocktail sauce, asparagus and mashed potatoes did add some flair. The sauce for the tender calamari with hot peppers, tomato, olives and garlic (\$23) over pasta, however, unfortunately was so watery it had no substance. It appeared the pasta had not been drained sufficiently.

A few desserts are made in-house, such as the translucent flan (\$7), while others are brought in. Options include a multi-layer chocolate cake (\$8) and tiramisu (\$7). Cormier doesn't consider Rick's a "dessert place," so he steers away from anything too fancy in favor of simpler sweet endings to the meals.

The chef met his wife, Dana, at

the restaurant, and she does a good job running the front of the house. The restaurant previously did not accept credit cards, now it does, and the former policy of reservations only for parties of six or more has been reduced to four or more. That's a help, since Rick's is very crowded, and couples who come on a weekend night likely will face a wait.

There is no longer a Rick involved with the restaurant. That was the former owner, and Cormier has thought about naming it something else eventually. But it's a safe bet that no matter what he calls it, this establishment will keep drawing a crowd with its moderate prices, convivial air and casual atmosphere.

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