

SARASOTA MAGAZINE

Let the Good Times Roll

John Bancroft

First came the beloved and long-running originals, Fred's and its trusty sidekick, The Tasting Room. Next was the new Fred's, which was pretty good but didn't last long. Now Libby's Café + Bar holds pride of place in the block opposite Morton's Market in Sarasota's Southside Village, and the good times have returned.

The tables dressed in white linens are back on the sidewalk, the breeze of conversation wafts from back-to-back bars, and chef Fran Casciato, late of Miami, is cooking from a menu considerably more ambitious than either of its predecessors. Service is warm and attentive, as is the greeting at the door. All the ingredients are in place. All Libby's needs now is staying power.

The menu is thoughtfully divided into small plates both hot and cold and larger main events, giving you a choice: Stop in on the way home for a salad and an uptown burger with Parmesan fries or gather your tribe and settle in for multiple courses. We opted for the latter and were happy we did.

Once seated at our table by the open French doors, where we were more or less instantly offered aperitifs and our glasses were filled with refreshing cucumber-scented "house water," we commenced to exclaim. Oh, wow, deviled eggs with caviar! Yellowfin tartare! Organic tomato bisque with eggplant! Truffled wild mushroom torte! And we hadn't even gotten off the starters page.

We settled down as we sipped our habitual bubbles, moved on to the main events page and made some decisions.

I chose to start with those deviled eggs (\$10), which were as delicious as good deviled eggs always are. But these were lifted to the realm of inspiration by the addition of sturgeon caviar farmed by the folks at our own Mote Marine. The salty bite of the tiny fish eggs combined with the familiar mellow yolks of hen eggs yielded a serious winner.

Colette started with a salad (\$8) that brought together the flavors of butter lettuce worthy of the name, equally buttery Asian pears, lightly candied walnuts and a vinaigrette starring sherried figs. Outstanding. But the note that put this salad over the top was blue cheese beignets fresh from the fryer, a wonderful twist on the sweet doughnut holes that are a must-have at New Orleans' Café du Monde.

The full-blown dinner menu begins with "Simply Grilled" fish, fowl

and meats, with or without sauces ranging from truffle aioli to country gravy for an additional \$4. More ambitious preps of seafood, steaks and chops follow.

Colette's choice, a mind-boggling 14-ounce Niman Ranch pork T-bone (\$25), was the clear winner in this round. The pork steak itself was nothing less than perfect: moist, sweet and bursting with flavor. The caramelized ginger-fig glaze complemented the meat beautifully, but the vegetable-fried rice knocked our socks off. Forget any fried rice you've tasted in a Chinese restaurant. This stuff was so intensely fragrant and lively that it rivaled the delectable pork for top billing.

My choice, a roasted swordfish "rollatini" (\$26), was the only thing we tasted that may need rethinking. The dish sounded like a dream come true: fresh fish in an eggplant wrapper (thus, rollatini) under a roasted tomato vinaigrette and topped with fried artichoke hearts. Individually, most of the ingredients were first rate. But the flavors and textures fought with one another; only the artichoke fritti emerged unscathed. Then there was that eggplant wrapper, which proved to be a thin, overcooked strip around the edge of the fish that added nothing to the whole. Subtracting that would improve the dish considerably.

But I quibble. I also ate everything on the plate. Let's move on to desserts, which were, to say the least, delightful. Somehow, we resisted the mile-high chocolate cake, which the menu thoughtfully warns is "bigger than your head!" I think we'll share that one next time.

This time, Colette went for a chocolate and peanut butter semifreddo (\$8), in which the almost frozen custard was topped with hot fudge and candied peanuts spiked with just enough salt. The custard itself was as light as anyone might hope, but pregnant with vivid flavors.

"This," Colette declared, "is what happens when a Reese's cup goes to heaven."

I chose a wonder, too, mine a warm banana zeppole (\$9). The chef again showed himself to be master of the fine art of frying dough. In this case, the light, puffy result was rich with ripe banana, hot from the oil and served with three dipping sauces: hot fudge, caramel apple and strawberry balsamic. Pretty darn heavenly, too.

We decided against espresso, owing to the hour, and instead savored the last of our Rex Hill 2006 pinot noir from Oregon's sublime Willamette Valley (\$37). This big, silky beauty is but one among dozens of stellar choices at every price point on a wine list obviously chosen with great care by sommelier James Hazeldine.

Good Deal

Happy hour at Libby's.

Every evening from 4 to 6 p.m., the bar at Libby's hosts a happy hour that really is. In addition to drink deals, a medley of \$5 Food Finds is offered. Choose from honey chipotle chicken fingers, good old fried

calamari, South Beach sliders (the chef once cooked at Danny DeVito's South Beach), rock shrimp tempura and truffled Parmesan fries with melted fontina cheese and house ketchup. Add a martini for \$3.75, and you've got a reason to make a little detour on your way home.

Libby's Café + Bar

1917 S. Osprey Ave., Sarasota

Reservations (recommended): (941) 487-7300

Hours: lunch 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday-Friday, dinner from 5 p.m. daily

Cards: AmEx, V, MC, DISC

Handicapped accessible: yes

Parking: on street

Cottage Cuisine

On 13th Street West near 13th Avenue West in Bradenton's still nascent Village of the Arts, look for a brightly painted cottage under a big shade tree and a hand-lettered sign at the curb: EAT HERE. Heed the sign. You have found Ortygia, a hidden treasure.

Chef Gaetano Cannata, who presides over both his kitchen and his cozy dining rooms with cheerful enthusiasm and obvious passion for his culinary roots, might be repairing a chair leg when you pop in for an early lunch. As soon as you walk through the door, however, there will be nothing on his mind but feeding you extremely well at a good price.

We visited twice recently and were charmed both times. The little house and its herb-scented patio feel instantly like home, provided home comes with a chef whose lively memory overflows with recipes learned from his Sicilian mother and father. This is not fancy cooking, exactly, but it is elegant.

Once at lunch and once at dinner we shared full portions of Cannata's housemade patés: a nearly black, very rich mushroom paté alive with capers, olives and a hint of Marsala, and a beautiful fresh chicken paté sweetened with basil and pistachios (\$7.50 each, or choose the combo for \$7.95). We were dead set on paté for starters this time, but we were sorely tempted, too, by the *pepperoni ripiene*, which stuffs sweet red bell peppers with provolone and Parmigiano, tomatoes, pine nuts and black currants, and the *melanzana farcito*, in which whole baby eggplants are stuffed with pecorino, mozzarella and basil before being simmered in tomatoes, basil and garlic. Next time, we promised ourselves, without fail.

At dinner, Colette ordered the big production number called *timballo*