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## Santa Cruz Style

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August 31, 2005

### Restaurant Review: Cafe Limelight shines in downtown S.C.

BY ANN PARKER  
SENTINEL FOOD CRITIC



Ever notice that sometimes restaurants offer excellent cuisine and efficient service yet somehow lack some essential appeal? And other places may have rough edges but feel so special and welcoming you can't wait to return?

Billy Thompson, Heather Scott and Farouk Algsaibi tempt diners with eclectic fare and wonderful warmth at Cafe Limelight. (Shmuel Thaler / Sentinel)

Cafe Limelight is the latter. After my friend Chelsea and I dined at this little bistro recently, we remarked on how delightful the meal was, saying we looked forward to telling friends about it.

Why did this restaurant (which opened March 19) leave such a positive impression? The food was interesting and reasonably priced, but not spectacular. Its atmosphere was comfortable and charming, yet no more so than dozens of other local places. Quite simply, Cafe Limelight practically glows with the lively energy, good humor and warmth of the people who run it.

Co-owners Billy Thompson and Farouk Algsaibi, aided by server Heather Scott, create the impression they've invited friends over to dine — thereby making friends of the diners who discover this little treasure.

Heather greeted us with a cheery wave as we strolled in through the patio (Limelight seats 45 inside, 25 outside). We sat at one of the mosaic-topped tables, surrounded by antique furniture, a retro-orange sofa and African masks. Billie Holiday crooned on the sound system. Chelsea, just returned from attending a wedding in Pakistan, was delighted to find a show of original photographs from the area she had visited. And when Billy stopped by the table to chat, we discovered he was from the small South Carolina town where my grandmother lived (if y'all enjoy Southern accents, get on down and jaw with Billy).

Lunch and dinner menus are basically the same, offering 10 hot panini sandwiches (each \$7.50) and half that many cold sandwiches (each \$6.50), plus several salads and housemade soups. All sandwiches come with chips or salad.

Although fairly modest, the menu presents a number of delectable choices — particularly the paninis, made on the restaurant's two special grills.

A ridged grill is used to create thicker sandwiches, such as my choice: Roast Turkey, Brie and Pesto Panini, grilled on rosemary foccacia. More delicate sandwiches need the flat grill, including a special grilled cheese sandwich named "Monica's Favorite" after an 11-year-old self-proclaimed expert, whose menu testimonial states, "I have had a lot of grilled cheese but this is the best."

Monica convinced Chelsea.

"I'm bringing Maya back here," Chelsea said, referring to her own daughter.

And maybe it was the childhood appeal of the grilled cheese, but I craved an Italian Soda, "The Real Thing with Real Cream" (\$2.50).

Heather hustled my vanilla soda out in a flash; it was perfectly made, cool, classy and refreshing.

We also ordered Gorgonzola Salad with Dried Cranberries and Toasted Nuts (\$5.75). And, noticing a weekday Happy Hour Special, offering any beer for \$2.50 or several Bonny Doon Wines for \$3.50, I requested a glass of Big House White, a crisply refreshing summer favorite. (Note: Limelight offers local wines only, about a dozen choices, plus several ports.)

A corrugated delicacy, my turkey panini's big-ridged foccacia slices enclosed warmed layers of turkey, buttery brie and savory pesto. The combination of earthy and edgy, plus the bread's zig-zag texture, made this a brand-new turkey sandwich experience.

Our salad bounced the flavors up a notch, salty gorgonzola and tangy cranberries enhancing crunchy baby greens, red peppers and walnuts. The sweet-sharp vinaigrette was a tad oily for our taste, but the flavor was good.

Chelsea enjoyed dinner but what she really desired was dessert. It was a good choice. Billy's Old Fashioned Root Beer Float (\$3.50) beckoned, but we couldn't resist the Yummy Snickers Dessert Panini (\$3).

Billy explained that he invented this decadent "dessert sandwich" using the classic candy bar's ingredients — chocolate, nuts and nougat — pressed on the flat grill between thin franchise bread slices. We gave it a sticky thumbs-up, noting that the warm bread offset its sweet innards.

"I'm desserts and wines, Farouk is all food, and Heather manages a little of everything," says Billy.

All three have strong academic backgrounds — biology, anthropology and literature, respectively — and Farouk formerly worked for George Lucas at ILM.

"So of course we're here running a restaurant in Santa Cruz," Heather says with a laugh. Billy's background includes "years of restaurant work," including training with Chef Angelo Servino of Tiburon.

He acknowledges that the Limelight space has hosted several businesses in a fairly short time but says, "We're here to turn that around with some good love."

He notes that the restaurant's produce, mostly from local farmers markets, is local and organic whenever possible.

Cafe Limelight is still evolving; last week they added a lobster roll.

"We just gave it a try: Girl, please! It was fantastic," says Billy — with his characteristic reserve.

*Ann Parker is a freelance writer and public relations consultant. She welcomes your suggestions for restaurants to review and comments about food in Santa Cruz County. Contact her at [atparker@pacbell.net](mailto:atparker@pacbell.net).*

**If You Go**

**WHAT:** Cafe Limelight.

**WHERE:** 1016 Cedar St., Santa Cruz.

**DETAILS:** 425-7873.

**HOURS:** Lunch: Tuesday through Friday, 11:30 a.m.- 3 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, noon-3 p.m.; Dinner: Tuesday through Saturday, 5-10 p.m.

**NOTES:** Lunch only on Sundays. Closed Mondays.

**Ratings**

**SERVICE:** Excellent

**CUISINE:** Good

**ATMOSPHERE:** Good

**VALUE:** Excellent

**AMBIANCE:** Very friendly, comfortable but cool

**COST:** Reasonable (upscale sandwiches, \$6.50-\$7.50)

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