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SOMETHING FOR EVERYBODY Wonder (left) and Quin (right) wait for their owners to arrive for lunch at Cafe Limelight.

Soaking up the Limelight

Lacing easy glamour with down-home ambiance, Cafe Limelight has become a charming destination

by **Christina Waters**

Since she's all about sensuous textures and flavors, Aimée was the right companion for my Cafe Limelight lunch last week. Aimée had already discovered this elegantly cozy little destination for lunch and after-work rendezvous. "I love their panini," she admitted more than once, as we grabbed a seat against the bamboo faux wainscoting and checked out the menu. No doubt about it, co-owners Billy Thompson (he's the one with the melodious Carolina accent) and Farouk Algsaibi (he's the mastermind behind the greatest hummus in the Western hemisphere) have put together something that shimmers with the sort of quality that is too-often an endangered species in 21st century restaurants—charm. How is it that those floor-to-ceiling velvet drapes look as though they've always belonged here, framing the view to the Cedar Street action? And why is it more fun to sip wine while gazing through the voluptuous leaves of a potted banana plant, than simply your basic fichus? I don't know but it does. Smart retro decor is a large part of Limelight's appeal — so plush are the burnt orange velour couch and arm chairs that everyone looks like a movie star perched on (or is it "in"?) them. Movie stars. Limelight. I begin to get the connection.

Aimée began to resemble some sultry leading lady from a Tennessee Williams play as we grazed the menu. "Oh, this grilled Brie panini"(actually the singular for these pressed Italian sandwiches should be "panino" but nobody much cares here so I won't either) — "there's a month's worth of Brie in it," she said, rolling her eyes. "I had one the first time I was here and it was so rich, but I couldn't stop myself from eating it all anyway." Aimée not only adores Limelight's two-fisted panini, but she's a special friend of the Happy Hours that offer happy prices on beers and Bonny Doon Vineyard wines, Tuesday through Friday from 5-7 p.m.

Limelight aims to please and does so with disarming style. Fresh soups alternate daily, salads are graced with exceptional vinaigrettes and the sandwiches, ah, the sandwiches. "I love to come here with girlfriends after work," Aimée confessed. "We sit outside on the patio and have a cheese tray and port." In addition to a smart handful of mostly local wines, Limelight offers a handsome array of ports and Madeiras. Somehow the word "Madeira" always makes me think of Edgar Allen Poe, another southern gentleman. On the other hand, the gorgeous Mississippi gothic mirror overlooking the petite wine bar looks very much like something Lestat would have enjoyed avoiding, if you know what I mean. Really inspired decor at Limelight—such a pleasure to be in non-generic surroundings.

We shared a platter of the house-made hummus, which is truly worth the visit all by itself (\$7.50). Densely textured, no fluff, the hummus was the stuff of Arabian nights, and arrived topped with olive oil and lemon, with plump triangles of toasted pita, red bell pepper (killer with the hummus) and cucumbers, plus a few choice olives added to the pretty mix. It was hard not to dive in, but when our panini arrived I was glad I'd showed a few minutes of restraint.

Fat corrugated wedges, sided by pretty greens in vinaigrette, the grilled sandwiches were glorious. Mine involved a molten lamination of pesto, turkey and Brie—oh God!—on rosemary focaccia, while Aimée worked her way through a hot press of sweet/hot salami, red bell pepper puree and mozzarella on francese (\$8.25 each). Both were delicious.

We split a tumescent wedge of deeply creamy New York-style cheesecake (which means very, very creamcheesy creamy) topped with a tart and tangy raspberry sauce that was luscious as moonlight on the bayou. You may fill in the lugubrious Southern metaphor of your choice here, but simply know that it was a memorable experience for our tastebuds (\$5.50). The espresso was both bracing and sexy, as in Milan meets Natchez. And as we sipped, our long, lean host came by to show off an experimental giant panino the size of a bath towel. "Now we're going to try to make one large enough for the Guinness people," he drawled charmingly. "And we'll invite everybody in town over for panini." That's an invitation no one could refuse. Cafe Limelight is one very bright idea.

Cafe Limelight. 1016 Cedar St., Santa Cruz. Tuesday-Friday 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; 5-9 p.m.; Saturday noon-3 p.m.; 6-10p.m.; Sunday noon-5 p.m. Closed Mondays. Call 425-7873.

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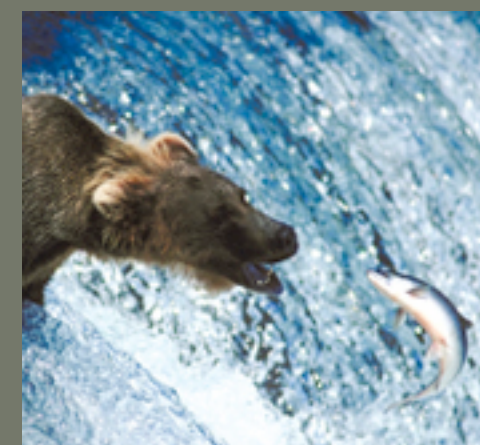
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