

Litchfield County has become a second home for hundreds of residents who are accustomed to the best that the city has to offer. The county has responded with a wide range of fine dining establishments that satisfy the craving for elegant fare served in just the right ambiance.

But sometimes great tastes can be found in work-a-day surroundings where the prices reflect not the quality of the food but the lack of pretense in the décor and the overhead. Two such eateries can be found in western Connecticut and draw patrons from far and near who have learned about the excellence of the cooking found behind the unprepossessing doors.

The villager in Kent has been a popular gathering place for decades but has seen a string of owners during those years and varying standards for the food.

Last November, Tony Hernandez, a new owner with a long history in Kent, took over its operation and has perked up the dining experience for its customers. Mr. Hernandez was formerly chef for 14 years at the ever-popular Fife'n Drum, located nearby, and is well known to Kent residents, many of whom have followed him down the street to his own restaurant.

Mr. Hernandez has been joined in his new enterprise by his wife, G. J. and by a devoted staff that caters to his grown clientele. "it was never in my mind to own a place", he said, "but when this place was for sale, it seemed like the time to leave the 'Fife'."

Indeed, Mr. Hernandez, a native of Oaxaca, México, never dreamed of being a cook at all. "I wanted to be a vet," he revealed. "I always loved animals. My grandfather had a farm, and I always thought I would be a vet and take care of his animals-but we didn't have the money for school. When I came here, some-one said. 'You want to be a vet? I will pay for it. 'But I told him, 'that dream is gone.'"

He added that in México men don't cook, but that his mother's side of the family was always involved in food preparing for catering jobs. When he came to this country as a teenager, he found work with a culinary Institute of America-trained chef/caterer. "I learned from him," he said.

Following that experience, he worked for six years in a bakery, where he honed skills that are finding new application at The Villager where the baked goods displayed in a showcase at the front of the restaurant are garnering rave reviews.

His next move was to Kent and the Fife'n Drum. The long years of training are now being applied to his own business. At present, he is continuing the menu the previous owner offered but is upgrading the quality. "it may be the same menu right now, but I am going to change it soon," he said, adding that even the same menu items can have a different taste. "anyone can cook, but it is not going to taste like it does here."

He was dreaming up new entrees. "I have a lot of ideas in my head," he said, ideas that are expressed through his daily specials. "I have peoples who came here five days a week and they want to see something different, I look at (food) magazines and I think, 'I can change that, 'I find ideas in the magazines, but I make them my own.'"

Luncheon specials include such offerings as chicken chimichanga- a flour tortilla filled with chicken, rice, enchilada sauce and served with salsa, guacamole and sour cream; a smoked salmon wrap with horseradish cream, red onions, baby spinach, avocado and capers; hot roast beef on a hard roll with mushrooms, onions, swiss cheese and served with steak fries or perhaps a turkey croissant and cranberry sauce, served with a cup of soup.

He says he uses all fresh ingredients- "I don't like frozen"- buying his fish fresh and using only Angus beef in his burgers. As the season changes, he anticipates moving from hot sandwiches and soups to cold entrees. "right now I am making galloons of soup- I make all my own- and lots of salads," he said. "But I try to cover all the bases. For instance, I always have fish and chips on Fridays-especially this time of year when a lot of people give up meat for Lent."

Mr. Hernandez is innovative in the soups he serves daily. Cold weather broths have included such hearty offerings as broccoli cheddar, cream of asparagus and chicken enchilada (2.99 for a cup; 3.99 for a bowl).

Currently, Mr. Hernandez opens for breakfast at 7 a.m., with a standard breakfast menu that ranges from pancakes-with variations to include sweet potato pancakes- eggs and omelets, breakfast sandwiches and the like. He serves eggs benedict as well as two variations on the theme; eggs Florentines with the baby spinach leaves and feta cheese drizzled with hollandaise sauce and Irish benedict with corned beef hash taking the place for ham.

Lunches bring a range of sandwiches, from the standard burger to a Monte cristo, made with ham and turkey, cheese and dipped in french toast batter before grilling, to a B.A.L.T. (bacon, avocado pulp, lettuce, tomato and thousand dressing in a pita pocket), vegetarians get a nod with an Mexican Garden burger, replete with cheese, sour cream, salsa and guacamole), a vegetarian melt of tomato, spinach, mushrooms, herbed Hellman's mayo light and melted cheddar on a croissant and the herbivorewich, grilled cheese, spinach, tomatoes, carrots, green peppers and the like.

The restaurant is open from 7 a.m. until 4 p.m. starting April, Mr. Hernandez will serve dinner Tuesday nights from 5 to 9 p.m. The Villager is located at 28 North Main St. Kent, Ct; 860 927 1555

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