

A foodie's paradise Weekend in Kingston offers delicious diversity

SUNDAY, JULY 26, 2009

KINGSTON, Ontario — One of my favorite getaways is a weekend in Kingston, Ontario.

It's a pretty drive over the Thousand Islands Bridge near Alex Bay. Get through Canadian customs, hop on "the 401" west and take the exit to downtown Kingston and you're there.

Or if you're really lucky, hop on a friend's 45-foot yacht and tie up in Kingston's lovely city marina for the weekend, right at the foot of downtown. Everything's within walking distance — shops, pubs and restaurants. And if you don't have a friend with a boat, there are a number of hotels and B&Bs along the waterfront.

CHEZ PIGGY

68R PRINCESS ST.

1 (613) 549-7673

WWW.CHEZPIGGY.COM

It's an unlikely name for this secluded courtyard restaurant that's been around for 30 years, and it continues to be a favorite for visitors and locals alike.

The weather cooperated, and we were lucky to get a table outside for lunch. Seems like this place is always busy.

The menu is always interesting, the wine list is superb, the wait staff is wonderful.

Several at our table took advantage of the "half sandwich du jour," which includes a cup of soup. This particular day the sandwich was shrimp and salmon salad with dill mayonnaise; the soup was a buttery and brothy corn chowder.

The overstuffed half sandwich was easily any other restaurant's whole sandwich: fresh, oversized bread from their sister bakery down the street, Pan Chancho. The seafood filling was fantastic.

"The Tuscan" sandwich was made with prosciutto, basil, tomatoes and bocconcini (small balls of mozzarella), served on foccacia bread with arugula mayo and a side of onion red pepper salad.

I went for the mussels Provencal, mussels steamed in white wine with herbs and leeks. This was one of the more expensive items on the menu, but worth every penny. Crusty bread for mopping made this dish good to the very last drop.

A bottle of nicely priced Kingston Chardonnay from Australia (yeah, go figure) served us well, as did Erin, our sociable server.

Chez Piggy is open seven days a week from 11:30 a.m. until midnight.

AROMA RESTRO-WINE BAR

248 ONTARIO ST.

1 (613) 541-0330

WWW.AROMAWINEBAR.COM

For dinner, we decided to visit a newcomer on the Kingston restaurant scene, Aroma Restro-Wine Bar. We reviewed it last summer and have been looking forward to a return visit ever since.

It offers creative global cuisine — tapas, salads and entrees — and a great, affordable selection of international wines, 50 of which are available by the glass.

Our table of eight took advantage of the "five appetizers for five dollars each" deal: goat cheese-stuffed falafel, bison tenderloin carpaccio, grilled calamari, scallops with roasted mushrooms and speck ham (a lightly smoked ham), and mussels and clams in a cilantro tomato broth.

Aroma offers two soups: "today's soup" and "yesterday's soup" (hey, soup is always better the next day, right?). I chose yesterday's soup, seafood Provencal, which was loaded with shellfish, flatfish, chorizo and herbs in a spicy tomato broth.

Salads combine extraordinary flavors and textures. The Caesar begins with romaine but adds fried capers, pickled onions and crispy speck ham and Romano. Shaved pear and fennel salad incorporates toasted walnuts and cabrales cheese (a pungent cheese from Spain). Papaya and avocado salad comes with crushed macadamia nuts and tamarind lemongrass dressing.

New this year at Aroma is entree plates (nearly 20) in two portion sizes. Regular portions are generally \$16 to \$28, reduced portions \$12 to \$16.

Some of our highlights were lobster carbonara with asparagus, roasted tomato and crispy speck; gnocchi with grilled chicken, smoked bacon, mushrooms, spinach and brown butter; grilled salmon with lobster risotto and asparagus in a Pinot Grigio citrus

saffron basil broth; porcini-crusteD veal with green garlic mashed potatoes and braised spinach in a Gorgonzola cream sauce.

Our wine selection was a bottle of rich and creamy Mandolin Chardonnay from Monterey, Calif.

The mastermind behind this operation is chef/owner Gurkan Soyic. Following our meal we got to meet Gurkan, who was hard at work with only one assistant in his open kitchen. Kudos to this talented chef who has added a new dimension in dining to Kingston.

Aroma Restro-Winebar is open seven days a week, serving its entire menu for lunch and dinner with the addition of specialty sandwiches for lunch.

PAN CHANCHO BAKERY

44 PRINCESS ST.

1 (613) 544-7790

WWW.PANCHANCHO.COM

The next day, a leisurely walk to Pan Chancho took care of our breakfast plans on the boat.

This is no ordinary bakery. This is much more than baguettes and batards. As in their restaurant, Chez Piggy, there are no limits here.

Scones? Cranberry, raspberry, raisin, blueberry, cheddar and more.

Muffins? Oatmeal raisin, pineapple carrot, rhubarb ginger, whole wheat banana, apricot pumpkin, raisin bran, apple ginger ...

Loaf breads? Lemon poppy seed, orange rhubarb, lemon blueberry, orange blackberry, lemon raspberry ...

Specialty breads? Dark Army rye, fig anise, cranberry pecan raisin, butternut squash, heritage red fife, pain de champagne ...

And it's not just a morning stop. Amazing salads and sandwiches, fancy desserts and comfort meals (don't miss the shepherd's pie or chicken pot pie) are available for takeout or to enjoy in Pan Chanco's cafe.



The weather held out, so our gang voted to do lunch at Chez Piggy once again. Of course, we had to be outside in the courtyard, and being a party of eight we had a bit of a wait. It was fun killing an hour at the bar and watching the hustle and bustle of wait staff and bartenders and bussers making the frantic lunch hour happen.

This time Janet was our lucky server, a 13-year veteran of "The Pig" with a never-ending smile.

Everyone tried something different: fresh Malpeque oysters on the half shell; warm baby spinach salad with Asiago cheese and pancetta; wild mushroom ragout with cappellini pasta; habanero chicken salad sandwich on multigrain bread.

My choice drew lots of attention: smoked wild salmon with potato rosti and dill sour cream. The rosti — a large, crispy, fried-to-order potato pancake made with shredded potato and onion — was delicious.

Chocolate espresso Kahlua cheesecake, one of the dessert specials, was even better than it sounded. I passed it around the table and the plate never made it back to me.

It didn't take too much badgering for Janet to arrange a quick kitchen tour for us, a real kick for a table of foodies. It's upstairs, small and crowded, but efficiently arranged. There must have been a dozen workers at their stations, and this was the middle of the afternoon after the rush had subsided.



A stop at the farmers market (and it is a huge one) on the square in the middle of downtown is always a must. You wouldn't think the Kingston area's growing season is much ahead of ours, but we purchased some of the most amazing corn, tomatoes, zucchini and fresh flowers and herbs I've seen since last summer.

CASA DOMENICO

35 BROCK ST.

1 (613) 542-0870

WWW.CASADOMENICO.COM

A late lunch required an even later dinner. This time we made 8 p.m. reservations at one of our favorite Italian restaurants, Casa Domenico, on Brock Street just opposite the farmers market.

From appetizers to wines to entrees to desserts, this is high-end Italian dining at its finest, designed and executed by chef/co-owner David Faroldi and sous chef Greg Snyder.

Minimal overhead lighting with candles on the tables set the mood. The menu presented a big problem — we wanted to try everything on it, but there were only eight of us.

A bottle of luscious Montezovo Amarone from the old country helped us narrow the field. For the guys, that is. The ladies pondered as they sipped a crisp Waterstone Chardonnay from California's Napa Valley.

From the list of antipasti (starters) and insalada (salads) we sampled "caprino" — pistachio-cruste d goat cheese, honey-roasted tomatoes and crisp prosciutto over mixed greens; "cervo" — grilled venison sausage set over braised peppers and salsa verde; and "bolognese"— a good portion of penne covered with homemade meat sauce.

Segundi (our entrees) were sensational. We ordered: "scaloppati" — scallops, bacon, honey mushrooms, sundried tomatoes and spinach in lobster bisque sauce; "salmone arrosto" — roasted salmon, potato puree, glazed pancetta and asparagus with a mustard shallot dressing; "gambare genovese" — shrimp over linguini with basil pesto cream sauce; "tonno terzetto" — tuna three ways (black-peppered, mustard seed-cruste d, carpaccio); "agnello arrosto" — herb-breade d lamb rack with pulled lamb shank ravioli, feta and garlic purée with spicy rosemary sauce.

Appetizers and salads were priced between \$11 and \$14, entrees \$17 to \$38. Leah provided excellent service to our sometimes playfully raucous table.

Casa Domenico is opens daily at 11:30 a.m. and serves until 10 nightly, 11 on weekends. They're closed on Sunday.



The next morning we made another stop at Pan Chanco to grab some goodies for lunch on the boat and also visited at a little family Italian market, Pasta Genova.

PASTA GENOVA

234 WELLINGTON ST.

1 (613) 542-6414

You can smell the garlic and the cheeses before you even open the door.

Inside the shoebox-sized store, there's a refrigerated display case with homemade sauces and imported cheeses and salamis and homemade pastas.

Six customers would constitute a crowd. Twice that number were working the place, making those sauces and pastas. Or perhaps they were just doing the family thing, ready to jump in and assist wherever needed.

Shelves line the walls with hard-to-find canned and jarred Italian specialties: San Marzano tomatoes, olive oils, roasted peppers, pepperoncini, capers and the like.

We left with a jar of homemade tomato basil sauce, a container of fresh lemon pepper linguini and a big slab of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese.



There's still a good deal of summer left. I hope you'll be able to make your way to Kingston to experience the food and the fun this city across the border has to offer.

PHOTOS



WALTER SIEBEL / WATERTOWN DAILY TIMES

Ah, Kingston ... just over the border, a city with great food on nearly every block.