

- RESTAURANT REVIEW
- MOVIE TIMES
- BEST BETS FOR ENTERTAINMENT

■ RESTAURANT REVIEW

Service with two smiles

THE VILLAGE PANTRY IN LOS ALTOS OFFERS COFFEE SHOP CLASSICS WITH TLC

By Elaine M. Rowland

Long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away, it seems, restaurateurs cared about their customers. Back then, customers were welcomed cheerfully, and service was every bit as important as the food.

Somehow, this concept has become alien to many dining establishments. It's rare enough that on encountering great service, you look across the table in disbelief at your dining companion and say, "Wow! They really look after you here."

That's what happened to me at The Village Pantry. Co-owner Julie Ogilvy estimates that a whop-

ping 85 percent of the Pantry's weekday customers are regulars. It's an amazing number, but easy to believe after hearing her call across the counter to customers by name, asking if they need refills on their coffee.

I looked for a hidden camera when a customer at the next table said, "Julie makes everyone feel special here," and someone at another table responded, "That's why my kids love coming here. Julie even said, 'You go ahead and eat; I'll cut up their pancakes.'" The adoration between Julie and her regulars is remarkable and palpable.

► Continued on next page

► Continued from previous page

Sure, the food is good too. (Prices are on par with any restaurant paying Los Altos rent: \$40 for breakfast for two.) But truly what sets the tiny Pantry apart is the *gemtlichkeit* (like cosiness, only better) of its lunch counter, which seats about a dozen, and its compact back room, tucked into a Southwest-style interior with arched doorway and ceiling timbers. Swirling around like a champion squash player is Ogilvy, full of smiles and talking up the house specialties, checking on you, and apologizing for any delay.

There are signs all over the front of the building declaring this to be a "coffee shop," and the menu confirms it. Whatever diner classics you're in the mood for—from pancakes or eggs Benedict to Philly cheese steaks or oatmeal—they've got them, available for breakfast or lunch, seven days a week.

I started my lunch with a cup of rich and thick split pea soup (\$3), with chunks of ham. The occasional whole pea seemed to confirm its homemade taste. It was a great, cool-weather companion to the Philly cheese steak sandwich on soft fresh bread (\$8.49). Though the beef was a tad salty, the hot sandwich with melted Swiss and sauteed onions and mushrooms hit the spot. No-frills plating (no wilted lettuce or rubber

pickles here) translates into faster service.

Drinks include coffee, tea, wine, sodas, beer and juice, as well as \$4 milkshakes. The shakes are on the small side, but good, though I didn't care for the ice cubes at the bottom.

My buddy had the ham and Swiss croissant sandwich (\$8), a good-sized entree dressed with Dijon mustard and red onions, among other things. Soft and flavorful, it turned out to be filling enough that the copious chef salad (\$8) with ham, hard-boiled egg, turkey and cheese was truly overkill. We live; we learn.

The breakfast menu offers diners choices as virtuous as cottage cheese and homemade raisin toast, or as naughty as eggs Benedict and/or chocolate chip pancakes. I chose that menu temptress, the chocolate chip pancakes (\$9), reasoning that the dish must be sort of healthy, being whole wheat. The two cakes were thin and springy; closer to crepes than heavy flapjacks. With a side of remarkably non-greasy bacon (\$3.95) it was not too heavy a breakfast, topped with perpetual coffee refills as fast as I could drink 'em.

Eggs Florentine (\$9.29), which is eggs Benedict with spinach, is another specialty of the house. The spinach was so lightly sauteed

► See DINING, next page

DINING

► Continued from page 15

it was still crunchy and obviously fresh. Potatoes on the side were a little greasier than I like. Juice orders are served in surprisingly big beer mugs, and I recommend the fresh-squeezed ruby grapefruit juice (\$3.50), as beautiful as it is good: slightly tangy but not too acidic.

Dog owners like the sidewalk tables, and on weekends larger

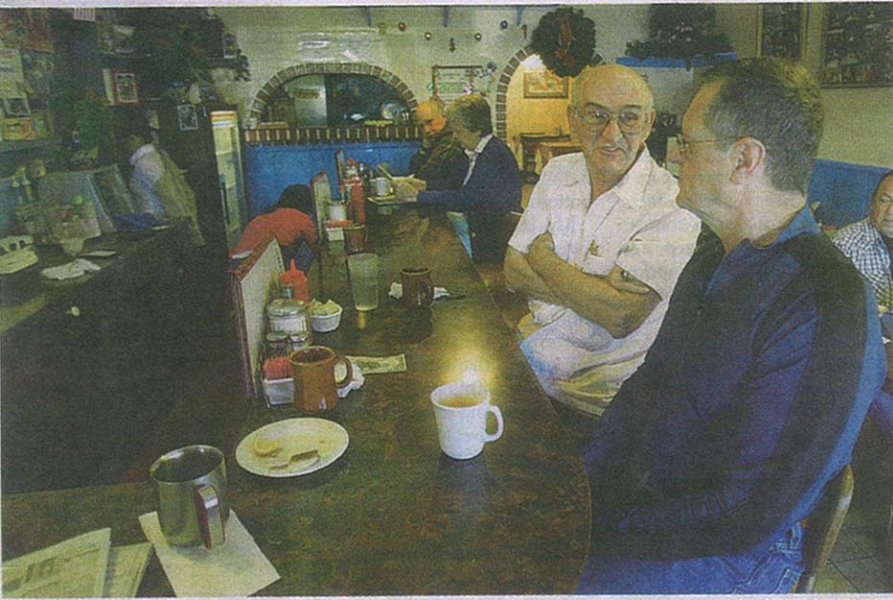
groups can find more room in the back courtyard.

Though Second Street's Village Pantry has had multiple owners since opening in the late 1940s, it retains an anachronistic charm (including being a cash-only business—no credit cards). Customers of all walks tell Ogilvy and her family, owners since 2002, not to change a thing, and she doesn't. And they come back, each generation leading the next, to the same trusty coffee shop. ■



NORBERT VON DER GROEBEN

Two pancakes and two eggs at The Village Pantry in Los Altos.



NORBERT VON DER GROEBEN

Doc Saul chats with Ray Balewicz over morning coffee and tea at The Village Pantry.

■ DININGNOTES

The Village Pantry
184 Second Street, Los Altos
(650) 941-0384
www.thevillagepantry.com

Hours:
7 a.m. to 2 p.m. daily

- Credit Cards** ●
- Alcohol** ✓
- Takeout** ✓
- Wheelchair Access** ✓
- Catering** ✓
- Outdoor Seating** ✓
- Noise Level** moderate
- Bathroom Cleanliness** fine
- Parking** street