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ShangriLa serves platters of perfection

By Rita Moran, Restaurant critic
December 2, 2004

We always knew there was a little bit of Shangri-La in Ojai, and a little bit of Ojai in Shangri-La, as illustrated in Frank Capra's 1937 film, "Lost Horizon." Hollywood found in Ojai's gentle mountains and verdant valleys the perfect scenery to embellish a story about a utopian land of peace and tranquility.



Lisa McKinnon/Star staff

Dishes like the goat-cheese stuffed eggplant include Garlic Gold, a garlic and olive oil dip.

Now Shangri-La has reappeared in Ojai, this time as a modest, attractive cafe with some of the natural virtues of its namesake -- but without the hyphen.



Photos by Lisa McKinnon/Star staff

ShangriLa Gourmet in Ojai serves food with an emphasis on natural ingredients.



Photos by Lisa McKinnon / Star staff

ShangriLa Gourmet in Ojai serves food with an emphasis on natural ingredients.

As organic ranchers and proprietors of ShangriLa Gourmet, "A Natural Foods Cafe," Rinaldo and Lalla Brutoco bring the bounty of their land to fortify the menu. They also add features unlikely to have garnered favor in the mountains of the Far East: buffalo and daily-roasted turkey.

It all sounded promising to us, and we weren't disappointed.

We doubt that everything we were served came from Ojai. But even so, there's a sense that the cafe

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deals with trusted providers in sync with the natural thrust of the menu. The menu also notes that the cafe avoids MSG, nitrites and additives whenever possible.

A basket of good crusty bread was quickly delivered by our gentlemanly server. On each table there's a jar of the cafe's trademark Garlic Gold, a combination of toasted garlic bits and olive oil that serves as a suitable dip for the bread.

Intrigued by the first listed beverage, homemade Meyer organic lemonade, I ordered a glass to sip while we made our menu choices. The lemonade is served unsweetened but is accompanied by a tiny pitcher of sweetened water to use at your own discretion. Au naturel, the lemonade was briskly refreshing; I eventually decided to stir in a little sweetness. ShangriLa also offers an "Arnold Palmer," allowing customers to mix their own blend of lemonade and fresh-brewed black tea.

Goat-cheese stuffed eggplant (\$5.95) was a delightful appetizer to share: three rolls of eggplant wrapped around very fresh goat cheese. Set against a plate-sized green leaf and accented with a mound of chopped tomatoes, the dish was beautiful to look at and was a tantalizing way to ease into dinner.

With each of our entrees -- buffalo meat loaf (\$13.95) and red snapper in caper sauce (\$15.95) -- we had a choice of soup or salad.

A cup of turkey-vegetable soup was excellent, full of a good assortment of vegetables and lots of shredded turkey in a fine broth. The mixed green salad was winningly fresh. We couldn't resist adding a cup of the cafe's buffalo stew, which also has exceptional flavor. But even the small cup had such large chunks of tender buffalo that it became very filling very fast.

The buffalo meat loaf was a thick slab topped with the cafe's homemade mushroom gravy, an assortment of mushrooms cooked with onions and stirred into the light sauce. The loaf itself had a good ultra-beefy flavor, with just a hint of veggies and herbs ground into it. The dish also is available topped with marinara sauce and melted provolone cheese, but to get the hearty loaf flavor, the gravy is the way to go.

With each entree, guests choose from among a baked potato, a potato du jour or pasta marinara. Steamed fresh vegetables -- large rounds of zucchini-like squash with a band of Garlic Gold drizzled across the center on the night we visited -- are a given. My friend's baked potato was premium quality, and my potatoes du jour were crisply roasted chunks.

My friend couldn't say enough about the fresh red snapper and its gentle hint of mild caper sauce. The Brutocos get their fish of the day straight from a local fishing boat.

Our appreciation for ShangriLa grew with each course, culminating in an elegant little dessert of fruity mousse and cake.

A good restaurant will leave customers wishing they could taste more selections from the menu. In our case, I really would like to return for a turkey sandwich, the grilled and roasted vegetable salad and, just out of curiosity, a buffalo steak.

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ShangriLa serves a small selection of wines by the glass or bottle, and a trio of unusual coffees. A tempting case of food specialties can be selected to take home or on a picnic.

SHANGRILA GOURMET

LOCATION: 219 E. Matilija St., Ojai. 646-7000.

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sundays.

WHAT'S HOT: Goat cheese-stuffed eggplant, turkey-vegetable soup, buffalo meat loaf, red snapper in caper sauce.

IMPRESSIONS: Comfortable cafe with deli counter; pleasant and helpful staff; tasty food with emphasis on natural ingredients, buffalo and vegetarian dishes.

COST OF DINNER FOR TWO: \$17-\$36.

-- Reviewed one evening in November.

If you know of new, unusual or particularly good restaurants, send an e-mail to Rita Moran at ritamoran@earthlink.net.

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