

Editor's note:

Each month Lowcountry Weekly invites you to dinner. Or lunch. Maybe even breakfast. This is not a restaurant review. (Story & Photos by Mark Shaffer

The Big Idea (with apologies to Ernest Hemingway) is to provide you, dear reader, with a vicarious culinary experience, to share something of our rich and diverse food culture and the individuals who labor so hard to put it on the plate. Our "moveable feast" is a sort of loosely organized, roving dinner party seeking out the best eating experiences the Lowcountry has to offer - high end, low end and every end between. We are dedicated, we are hungry and the food is out there.

If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.

□□ □□□ □□□ □ [J.R.R. Tolkien](#)



Prologue

There is a word that keeps popping up in restaurant conversation these days – a very simple word, an adjective that would logically seem to be synonymous with any establishment preparing, serving or selling food. The word is “fresh,” and up until recently on the American culinary scene it meant almost as much as an election year campaign promise. That is changing – has changed – thanks in large part to a cultural re-awakening to the food we eat. This [growing phenomenon](#) is largely due to the efforts of individual restaurateurs, chefs, growers, and producers committed to something better than the bottom line, something fresh. It's a little like the movie business.



Eating at a chain restaurant is like watching a Hollywood blockbuster: the plot is formulaic, the outcome is usually predictable, there are few surprises, and an hour afterward there's really nothing to discuss. A good independently owned restaurant should be more like a [Coen](#),

[Brothers](#),

film (or in this case perhaps

[Werner Herzog](#)

) full of innovation, unforeseen twists and turns, the product of passion – something to which you'll happily return to experience again with friends in tow.

Something fresh.

The Lowdown

Location: 1430 Ribaut Road, Port Royal SC.

Atmosphere: Fine dining with a warm, relaxed feel.

Cuisine: European with a regional flair.

Alcohol: Full bar.

Hours: Lunch 11am – 2:30 pm, Dinner 5 pm – 9 pm Monday through Saturday.

Silvi's European Cafe

Written by Mark Shaffer

Tuesday, 30 September 2008 08:00

Reservations: 843-379-2823

Etcetera: Plenty of room for private parties and special events.

Website: <http://silviseuropeancafe.com>



“We like to play with food,” says Silvia Kuhn. Her [accent](#) is exotic in this land of elongated vowels and unfinished R’s. “I love food. Food is my life.” There it is. You can see the passion sparkle in her eyes as she says it. Chef Lutz – her husband and partner – has the same twinkle when he talks about a life lived in kitchens from

[Cologne](#)

to

[Majorca](#)

, Europe to the U.S. And he uses a particular word a lot. “Everything is fresh,” he tells us. “All is [prepared] fresh, homemade – nothing but fresh herbs and sauces and oils, local and in season if possible.” And though the Kuhns are German, the sign over the door clearly declares this is Silvi’s European Café.

On tape:

Chef Lutz: “There’s a little French, of course some Italian and Spanish...”

Feast: “Right, very European. The core is German, but - ”

Chef Lutz: “I am German, but our food is not only German.”

Silvia: “Everyone thinks that Germans eat only sauerkraut, bratwurst and cabbage.”

Chef Lutz: “Like the Bavarian area, but we’re not Bavarian, we’re from Cologne – very close to the borders of Luxembourg, Belgium and France; which means we have a very different kind of food.”

That’s not to say Deutschland is conspicuously missing from the menu. Schnitzels and strudels abound. But the Kuhns have not limited themselves to just the one continent and its myriad cuisines. Chef Lutz is already incorporating Lowcountry inspiration to his repertoire, adding dishes like Seafood Pasta St. Helena and Pork Tenderloin Port Royal as well as his own creations featuring local fish and shrimp.

Call to order

The Moveable Feast convenes at a table in the rear of the restaurant near the long L-shaped bar. As the featured dishes are laid out on the linen it becomes quite apparent that there are indeed a lot of influences at work here. The plating and presentation is sublime. We pass around Chef Lutz’ Potato Pancake topped with house cured salmon and sauerkraut, the Avocado Shrimp Salad, a special du jour featuring thinly sliced pork loin and asparagus in a white wine sauce over homemade pasta, Silvi’s Pastry Sampler (the savory kind) and a huge bowl of the Goulasch Soup.



“This one may be a bit harder to write about, huh?” My fellow Feaster is not kidding.

On tape:

(Sounds of forks and knives on plates, intermittent groans of ecstasy)

Feaster1: Mmmm. The [potato] pancake with the salmon – delicious!

Feaster2: Did you try that yet?

Feaster3: Not yet.

Feaster1: Oh, my gosh – so good.

Feaster4: They're freshly shredded. A lot of times you can tell –

Feaster1: They're processed?

Feaster4: Yeah, they're mushy or something. But these are crispy, the old fashioned way.

Groans of ecstasy are always a pleasant surprise at these gatherings, but then so much about Silvi's is a surprise including the restaurant's classic, comfortable ambience. The nondescript two story beige building barely hints at the warmth within accented by rustic plank flooring, intimate lighting and tables draped in white linen. The second floor seats up to 80 and is available for private gatherings, receptions and parties. In fact, the restaurant, Beaufort and the Lowcountry sort of took the Kuhns by surprise. Silvia, Lutz and their three young children were living in D.C. looking for an opportunity beyond the beltway when the property turned up online. "I never knew what was Craig's List," Silvia confesses. "Now, I know." When another party became interested in the building she made a whirlwind trip to check things out. Two weeks later the Kuhns were celebrating Easter as new residents of the Lowcountry.



On tape:

Feaster3: This sauce is terrific.

Feaster2: On the shrimp and avocado?

Feaster1: Yes.

Feaster4: It's fantastic.

Feaster3: It's a cognac cocktail sauce.

Feaster2: Did you say cognac cocktail sauce?

Feaster3: Cognac cocktail sauce.

Two halves of perfectly ripe avocado are filled with large local shrimp, sauced with the chef's creation (a light pink to match the shrimp) and plated with a salad of fresh mesclun and tomato tossed with Chef Lutz' signature dressing. This will be a trend.

On tape:

Feaster2: The salads are beautiful.

Feaster1: They are beautiful. The dressing's delicious.

Feaster2: What is it?

Silvia: Chef's secret.

Feaster2: I don't think you can stress enough just how good this is - just so fresh.

There's that word again.

The Pastry Sampler comes with the same robust salad. The large puff pastries are packed with hearty, savory fillings, one with a tangy chicken curry mixture, the other with the goulasch stew. The bowl of goulasch begs for a cold dreary day. This is pure Old World comfort food. Like

American chili, this dish differs vastly between and beyond borders, from cook to cook. Chef Lutz' version of goulasch is like a Texan's approach to chili: meat, why screw it up with vegetables? Big chunks of lean beef and pork are slow-simmered in a rich red broth. The result is a carnivore's version of love on a spoon.

On tape:

Feaster4: The goulasch is very good. I'm surprised there's no paprika in it.

Feaster3: Everybody's got a different way to do it.

Feaster4: It doesn't taste like the Hungarian goulash my mom used to make.

Feaster1: This is very rich, very meaty.

Feaster2: It's wonderful with the beer, the Spaten.



Silvi's features select German beers on tap, like the hard-to-find Spaten, a full selection of domestics and an evolving wine list. Once again, don't expect any Liebfraumilch or similar gasthaus stereotypes. The labels are mostly Californian and French, the wines carefully selected to pair with Chef's delicate Potato Crusted Red Snapper, hearty meat dishes – even Silvia's irresistible desserts.

Did we mention dessert?

Your Just Desserts

Once upon a time, in another life not so long ago, Sylvia Kuhn had a bakery. She grew tired of flaky pastry chefs and bakers who failed to rise to the occasion. "So," she said "I can do this. I'll just do it myself. And I did." Dessert is her domain. "So often desert gets ignored, Chef's just buy something," she says. Not so at Silvi's. In addition to the usual confections on the menu, each day she whips up something special depending upon her whims and – wait for it – what's fresh.

In a single voice we utter a common word as the plates approach, "wow." Strangely, this where the tape runs out.

The Tiramisu is done Italian style – layers of sponge cake filled with a fluffy amaretto marscarpone. The cherry strudel is a simple flaky pastry stuffed with a filling of fresh cherries, tart and bright. But the Chocolate Dream... {mosimage}

Few things can actually transform intelligent, articulate adults into babbling, gurgling infants like a really rich, really decadent slab of gooey, chocolaty temptation. This is one of those things: chocolate mousse, layered with chocolate cream, topped with a deep, dark hazelnut ganache on a chocolate caramel almond crust. Later, when I regain consciousness, I find the following entry in my notes underlined and bracketed:

Best. Choc. Dessert. Ever.

The rest of the day is...blurry.

Encore

The next evening my wife, Susan, and I return for an early dinner. The restaurant's character is transformed. The light is softer, the wood hues richer, the tablecloths somehow brighter, more elegant. We start with the Strudel Silvi, a pastry filled with smoked pork, sauerkraut and cheese served with the house salad and that secret dressing.

From "Chef Lutz' Special Entrees" Susan picks the Veal Cordon Bleu. I go with "A Little Taste of Germany" and the classic Jagerschnitzel, a breaded pork cutlet with a mushroom-herb sauce. The veal dish is a study in layers of flavor, from its stuffing of ham and oozing Swiss, to the potatoes au gratin and the asparagus drizzled with a light, creamy hollandaise. The Jagerschnitzel is pan fried golden brown, the meat tender and perfectly seasoned. The mushroom sauce is an earthy compliment – thick and rich. The sides are exceptional: tangy red cabbage hinting of vinegar and applesauce, sliced potatoes fried crispy with bacon and green onions. I can hear Tony Bourdain's voice in my head, "forget the potatoes, go for the meat, man! It's all about the meat!" But it's too late. They're just too damned tasty.

We'll need a couple of boxes, but there's no way we're leaving without at least sharing a desert. And as far as I'm concerned (and if I know my wife) there can be only one. Silvi's Chocolate Dream arrives garnished with sliced mango and topped with a luscious red strawberry.

"How to describe this?" She ponders the next luxurious bite. "It delights your palate and satiates your sweet tooth without overpowering."

You're on a roll, kid.

"You can taste each layer. The fruit – (another bite) – the flavors work together or individually, offsetting, refreshing, complementing."

The same could be said of the restaurant itself, or as Chef Lutz puts it "it's all about taste. We're fine dining, but we're not fancy. People want taste. Food is taste."

Silvi's menu welcomes the diner in five languages. If food is the universal language, the Kuhns are well-spoken indeed. We look forward to future...conversation.

Leftovers

On tape:

Feaster2: The bread is so good.

Feaster3: That bread is good.

Feaster4: It tastes like it's been rubbed with fresh garlic. My grandmother used to make that for me. She'd toast the bread and rub it with garlic cloves and my father would only let me eat it on Fridays so I wouldn't offend the other kids in school.

Feaster1: My grandmother used to rub my grandfather with fresh garlic.

(Stifled giggles)

Feaster4: Are you serious?

Feaster1: (deadpan) No.

(Laughter)

Meeting adjourned.