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great taste

MAGAZINE



Fresh Flavors

Quattro Caffé

Fettuccine alla Pescatora

Chef Ramirez



FEATURE: L'ENTRÉE

HEALTH FOOD REVOLUTION



by Kelly O'Quinn

As of January 1, 2011, California Legislation passed a law that bans all trans-fats from the menu at all California restaurants. California, which became the first state to partially ban trans-fats in 2008, is a leader in the health revolution. Nearly everywhere you go to eat, you'll see calorie counts, vegetarian, and gluten-free options on menus, even at those thought of as non-healthy restaurants. Not only has the health craze hit already existing chains, new restaurants are popping up whose sole focus is on healthy, organic, sustainable, and delicious dishes. Establishments such as Seasons 52, True Food Kitchen, and 118 Degrees are finding huge success in the relatively small gourmet health food niche.

Along with the general switch of focus to healthful and organic foods, there has been a huge expansion of gluten-free items. In the past, gluten-free foods have been extremely difficult to find and largely ignored by anyone without a gluten aversion. Gluten, which is a protein composite used in the processing of wheat, barley, and rye, is present in multiple food staples, such as pasta, grain, cereal, many processed foods, and sometimes oats. The proliferation of gluten in modern food makes it extremely difficult for people with Celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder of the small intestine which prevents the body from processing gluten, and others with gluten-aversions to find acceptable foods, especially when eating out. People with gluten-aversion or Celiac disease have to choose very carefully where they eat and often decide to simply eat in or at a friend's house instead.

Jim Collins, a Southern California resident living with Celiac disease and type 1 diabetes, often decides to eat at home instead of going out because it is easier and quicker to find gluten-free options. "The only way to find out if a restaurant has gluten-free items is to go out and ask, check their websites, or call the

corporate offices," said Jim, who finds it very challenging to find restaurants where he doesn't have to worry about whether or not their dishes include gluten. When Jim does decide to go out to a restaurant, he has to go through the trouble of first finding out if the establishment offers gluten-free items, and then brings his own back-up meal just in case. As you can imagine, this adds an unnecessary level of stress to what should be a fun, relaxing outing. Isn't the point of eating out to enjoy great food with good company and let the restaurant take care of everything?

With one out of every ten people in the United States suffering from some degree of gluten-aversion and many more people cutting gluten out of their diet in an effort to lose weight and improve their health, it's vital that restaurants consider offering gluten-free dishes. And not only from the consumer standpoint. "If somebody is gluten-intolerant, they get to decide where they go eat, so that brings in the family and friends, expanding the amount of people who try your restaurant," testifies Chef Michael Stebner, Executive Chef of True Food Kitchen.

True Food Kitchen, which has locations in Southern California and Arizona, features a menu based on Dr. Weil's Anti-Inflammatory Food Pyramid. The main proponents of Dr. Weil's food pyramid are fruits, veggies, legumes, healthy fats, and seafood, causing many of their dishes to be healthy by default. "For a long time, Dr. Weil has said that good tasting food can be healthy. This is kind of his incarnation of that philosophy that you can get great tasting food that can be good for you," says Chef Stebner. True Food Kitchen's menu was originally just focused on good food with healthy ingredients, but soon Chef Stebner realized that their most popular dishes were either vegetarian or gluten-free. "It's driven by the consumer; the consumer wants gluten-free, more veggies, etc., and we're just giving them what they're asking for. As the menu evolves, we incorporate requests more and give more interesting options," Chef Stebner says of the evolution of True Food Kitchen's menu.

Having a menu that changes with the seasons presents some unique planning obstacles. His goal is to use locally produced ingredients as much as possible, not only to support local growers, but because it is cheaper and easier to buy ingredients that are in season for the area you're cooking in. "Go to the market. If there are fava beans, they go on the menu. Don't put it on the menu unless it's available. In season costs less and tastes better. This gives our guests fresh food at more reasonable prices," he explains. While it is more difficult to plan a menu based on the changing growing seasons, Chef Stebner sees it as an advantage. It allows him to present his customers with the freshest ingredients at lower prices, giving them a great dining experience.

And the customers are happy about it, too! The best compliment to Chef Stebner is when people walk out the door saying they feel better than when they walked in. It's so rare that you leave a restaurant after a large meal feeling good about yourself, and Chef Stebner has managed to provide his customers that experience. Since customers don't feel guilty after eating at True Food Kitchen, they'll opt more frequently for a dessert or drinks. "We sell a ton of desserts because people feel good enough to eat one," says Stebner.

With happy customers and a happy chef, True Food Kitchen has become the most successful of the Fox Restaurant concepts. True Food's locations continually bring in a multitude of customers without impeding upon the customer base of their neighboring restaurants. Because of their unique menu and environment, True Food maintains a customer base separate from that of other restaurants. "It's a different mindset of people who eat at True Food than at a steakhouse or other restaurant. No competition means huge success," explains Chef Stebner. With plans to expand to major markets across the U.S., it seems that True Food Kitchen has hit the sweet spot of delicious and healthy that we have been waiting for. 