

Fill up while enjoying family time at these Los Gatos brunch hotspots

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Los Gatos Weekender

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As a general rule, breakfast doesn't include chocolate fountains, fruity libations or seafood. But call it brunch and suddenly anything goes - you can start your meal off with duck confit spring rolls, follow it up with eggs benedict and wash it down with a pomegranate martini, all with nary a raised eyebrow at the table. Whatever your preference is, from modern dishes like sirloin sliders to salmon pizza or more traditional breakfast fare, such as buttermilk pancakes, you can find it on a brunch menu in Los Gatos.

THREE DEGREES

After taking the helm at Three Degrees last month, chef Jeffrey Brandenburg is getting ready to wheel out his new menu in April. Since Brandenburg lived in Maui for more than a decade, one can expect a

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bit of Hawaiian influence on the brunch menu, including sushi.

Brandenburg is no stranger to Los Gatos: He was a chef at Steamer's Grillhouse for nearly seven years before heading to the Plumed Horse in Saratoga.

When the position at Three Degrees - which is just a few blocks from his home - opened up, he jumped at the chance to revamp the menu.

"This is quite an undertaking," Brandenburg says.

With a vast array of foods to choose from, brunch is a popular fixture at Three Degrees, especially around holidays, such as Easter and Mother's Day, when the restaurant will serve anywhere from 500 to 700 people. The restaurant offers everything from a personalized omelet station and spiced prawns to tiramisu and a chocolate fountain with fresh plump strawberries for dipping. Although the menu will be overhauled, special items will remain.

"There are certainly things that I think people would scream over if we took it off the menu," Brandenburg says.

With such variety, people can create their own ideal plate - a system Brandenburg is a big fan of, as he will frequently order up to seven appetizers when out to dinner. "I kind of approach eating like that," he says.

Location: The Toll House Hotel, 140 S. Santa Cruz Ave., (408) 884-1054.

Prices: Prix fixe brunch, \$34 (adults) and \$14 (children).

Brunch hours: Sunday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

CALIFORNIA CAFE

The weekend after Easter, one might expect California cafe's brunch to be a little slow. But at 2 p. m., with the patio booked solid and people lingering over garden-fresh salads and fresh squeezed orange juice, the scene was evidence to the contrary.

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"We're the place to be," says chef de cuisine Greg Flores. And with tantalizing drinks such as blood orange margaritas, how could it not be?

Led by chef Taylor Boudreaux, the restaurant's philosophy wholeheartedly embraces California cuisine - all vegetables are locally grown - with its seasonal ingredients and meals done simply. There's even a menu item named for the town: Eggs Los Gatos, featuring two sweet Dungeness crab cakes with fresh tomatoes and poached eggs. Everything but the gelato is made in-house. Three chefs de cuisine assist executive chef Boudreaux in creating unique items like Jamaican-spiced calamari with toasted cashews and shrimp and seafood dumplings stuffed with scallops.

In all, roughly 300 plates are served on Sundays. That number is expected to more than triple on Mother's Day.

Location: 50 University Ave., (408) 354-8118.

Prices: \$10 to \$20.

Brunch hours: Saturday, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. and Sunday, 10:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

SOUTHERN KITCHEN

For the best biscuits and gravy in town, head straight to Southern Kitchen. Owner Mike Thompson will likely be the one to greet you at the door, as staff members sit and chat with the customers in booths or hustle around with plates loaded with standard country fare. Thompson's wife Rosemarie, a career waitress, purchased the restaurant where she worked as a server 15 years ago on a hunch that it was a good investment. Armed with the motto "fast, friendly, efficient service and good food," she's managed to upgrade the quality of ingredients and keep the prices reasonable.

"We're very proud of our country gravy," Mike Thompson says. The homemade secret sauce can be found slathered on the country fried steaks and biscuits and gravy.

The cozy atmosphere serves as a home away from home for out-of-towners and locals in search of some good comfort food. On the wall behind the counter hang several dozen framed signatures of Hollywood heavyweights such as Lyle Lovett and Anne Heche, alongside those of San Jose Sharks players. But the telltale sign of Thompson's priorities are the framed photos of the staff with their children. Thompson met Rose when she worked as a waitress at Southern Kitchen, and their two sons met their future wives while working at the restaurant. "It's just been a real special place for our family," Thompson says. And you can tell.

Location: 27 E. Main St., 408.354.7515.

Prices: \$10 to \$15.

Brunch hours: Saturday, 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., and Sunday, 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.

TREVESE

For owner and chef Mike Miller, there had to be a better way to do brunch than having people scoop cold, watery eggs out of a tray.

"Brunch is more of a social event. A dining experience is a social event. Lunch is a necessity," Miller says.

"We're trying to keep things simple but still be thoughtful enough to keep things tasty - something familiar, but something different," he says.

Though they only began offering brunch service on Easter, they served 130 people the first day and are

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ready for more. The dishes focus on simple elegance, including French toast bread pudding, fried oysters with curried mango and shiso sauce, whole wheat pancakes with maple citrus and vanilla syrup and a soft scrambled egg crepe with Maine shrimp and creme fraiche.

Location: 115 N. Santa Cruz Ave., 408.354.5551.

Prices: \$10 to \$20.

Brunch hours: Sunday, 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

LOS GATOS CAFE

A crowd of hungry fashionistas outside Los Gatos Cafe is an iconic image of how brunch is done in this town. Diners don't mind braving the line to eventually feast on a side of strawberry shortcake big enough to call itself a meal, fluffy soufflé omelets or heartily seasoned potatoes.

Owners Robert Morcate and Dean Reno opened the cafe in 1987, determined to change the way breakfast was done. "There was pretty much a standard in the breakfast industry, and we changed all that," Morcate says. "You used to be able to choose what type of toast you had. Here, you have dozens of options."

And they always try to keep things interesting with items like the crab avocado souffléomelet.

On average, 500 plates go out on a Sunday, and patrons can expect a wait even at 1:30 p.m. "Saturday and Sunday mornings, you get up and people want to spend time with their families. The best way to do it is out," Morcate says. "It's nice to be served."

While the din inside can often make conversation difficult - if not impossible - who needs talking,

anyway? You should be eating. Morcate recommends the Gorgonzola scramble or Swedish pancakes.

Location: 340 N. Santa Cruz Ave., 408.354.4647.

Prices: \$15 to \$20

Brunch hours: Saturday and Sunday, 6 a.m. to 3 p.m.

LOU'S RESTAURANT AND CAFE

No place that features a pancake stuffed with ham and cheese on the menu is going to be easy on your waistline. But if you're looking for breakfast done right, head to Lou's. It's run by brothers George and Spino Tsaboukos, who grew up learning the business from their father, Tasso. Under his insistence, the boys started as dishwashers and busboys and graduated to servers before taking over in 1996. Spino "takes care of the front of the house; I take care of the back of the house," George says. The crowd is a mix of teenagers, 30- and 40-somethings and seniors.

"We have great regulars," George says. "They have seen us grow up."

Menus are just a formality for many: Patrons already know what they're having. And the staff can be heard quipping, "Long time, no see," to those at the counter.

Lou's signature dish is the eggs benedict. The heavy hollandaise sauce with lemon flavor is what keeps Terry Ward coming back. He makes the trip at least once a month from San Jose to sit at the U-shaped counter, perfectly designed for someone like him who likes to chat. "I consider (Lou's) family-oriented," Ward says, "but I think it caters to just about everyone, whether you're single or a family."

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Location: 15691 Los Gatos Blvd., (408) 356-8383.

Prices: \$10 to \$15.

Brunch hours: Saturday and Sunday, 6 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Breakfast foods are served throughout the day and week at these establishments.

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