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## Experience Scandinavia at Lighthouse Diner

Leslie Harlib

THE NAME Lighthouse Diner is simple, homespun; sounds like pure Americana. I'd expect a basic restaurant that offers a variety of breakfasts, egg dishes, sandwiches and your burgers and chops. Lighthouse does indeed serve all of these. But there's a dressier, surprising side to this comfortable, simple Danish/American restaurant that opened on Court Street Plaza in downtown San Rafael a little more than two years ago.

Lighthouse Diner is the younger sister restaurant to the Lighthouse Caf  in Sausalito, the building on Bridgeway with the quaint little lighthouse-shaped tower on top. San Rafael's Lighthouse is a more sophisticated version, with a dinner menu and a full bar that starts pouring at 11 a.m. daily.

Filling a long, rectangular space with windows only at the front, the d cor reminds me of the interior of a first-class train car from the 1940s while still feeling contemporary and clean. Seating is mostly in padded booths that line a wall painted with a mural of a cloud-scudded sky and boats afloat off the coast of Denmark. Also, I like the outdoor dining patio with umbrella-shaded tables that face Court Street Plaza's waterfall-style fountain. As open-air dining options in downtown San Rafael go, this is tops.

Judging from the camaraderie and laughter coming from the almost-full bar stools on a recent visit, regulars may drink as well as eat their dinners. If you prefer to stick to wine and beer, there's a one-page wine list and some interesting beers on tap as well as bottled. I loved a half pint of Danish hefeweizen, a malty, light ale with a butterscotch underbelly. It went beautifully with all our food choices.

Starters include excellent house-made Gravlax with a mustard-dill sauce (\$7.95). This Scandinavian-style fish is cured rather than smoked. Made in-house, it was plush as rose petals in the mouth, with a light sweetness contained by dabs of the mustard sauce and fragrant, dense slices of Danish-style whole-grain rye bread. For a more complete Scandinavian flavor combo, order a Danish akvavit, on the rocks - an indulgent tipple with this fish.

Six escargot (\$7.95) arrived in a white ceramic dish with little depressions to hold bubbling butter, garlic and parsley tide pools, each home to a tender (and probably canned) snail. A side of two thin white bread planks, toasted and infused with more garlic and a hint of cheese, were great for soaking up that butter sauce.

Lighthouse's version of fried calamari (\$6.95) with cocktail sauce was better than average. The squid was tender under a light crumb coating flecked with parsley. While mild in flavor, something about the texture of these - that lovely balance of soft and crispy, and the lusciously squidgy curls of tentacles in particular - made this an appetizer to munch almost mindlessly while I sipped beer and occasionally watched World Cup the broadcast on the TV above the bar.

After seeing flames shoot up from someone else's sizzling dinner, we had to try that as well. Entrees include two types of steak, a 12-ounce pepper steak with a twist (\$19.95) and a 20-ounce Trevor's steak with a twist (\$28.95). Both are served with an aromatic cognac-cream sauce flamed table-side that has so much drama that the fire shoots up a good foot into the air. Better not have big hair.



Diners eat together by an oceanscape mural at the Lighthouse Diner in San Rafael. From left are: Craig Cloor of San Anselmo, Adam Shaw of San Mateo, Donald and Lynn Sherman of Oakland. (IJ photo/Alan Dep)

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We tried the 12-ounce version and found a surprisingly tender, good-quality piece of beef, nicely scored from the grill, rare as requested and punched up with mellow green peppercorn nuances. The steak came with fresh asparagus and little roasted new

potatoes, both simply cooked and barely seasoned.

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From the Danish specialties, I sampled the Danish meatballs, called Frikadeller (\$9.95), which were partnered with tangy red cabbage and more of those marble-sized potatoes. The meatballs, three to an order, were as big as goose eggs and cloaked in a simple brown gravy. They were so firm that they could have been the basis for a new type of sport. With this dish, their savory flavor and that sense of eating a truly different type of dish, scored over the texture.

Scampi linguine (\$15.95)

showed up as another generous portion. A heaping

portion of al dente pasta was topped with six moist prawns, lots of sliced mushrooms (an unpleasant surprise to one of my diners, as these were not listed in the menu description) and a cream, parmesan and wine sauce at once delicate and rich.

Other Danish dishes, which I find most interesting, include two kinds of herring, both curried and pickled in wine sauce (\$8.95); Copenhagen burger, served open-face (\$9.25), with onions, beets, capers, horseradish and egg yolk; chicken and asparagus in asparagus sauce with mashed potatoes (\$9.95); and specials that change daily.

Of the desserts, a chocolate mousse, pale and milky in the 1950s style and with a pleasant extra kick of Bailey's Irish Cream (\$5.25), was a better bet than the Danish pancakes with ice cream and strawberries (\$5.25). These sounded great, but instead of the delicate, eggy crepes I expected, the pancakes were almost thick enough for breakfast and on the tough side.

Servers, as of this writing, are all fair-haired females from northern Europe. Coincidentally, they're all named Anna. We found it out from our own Anna, who was brisk, friendly and took good care of us with no-nonsense style and competence.

If you deign to dine Danish, this is the place to do it.

Review

The Lighthouse Diner

Address: 1016 Court St., San Rafael

Phone: 721-7700

Web site: [www.lighthouse-restaurants.com](http://www.lighthouse-restaurants.com)

Cuisine: Danish and American

Service: Good, friendly

Recommended dishes: Gravlax with dill mustard sauce; fried calamari; pepper steak

Liquor selection: Full bar, one-page wine list, beers

Heart-healthy and vegetarian selections: Few

Parking: Nearby metered street parking or lots

Wheelchair access: Yes

Hours: 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. weekdays; 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. Saturdays; 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sundays; bar open until 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays

Credit cards: Most major

Summary: More sophisticated than its Sausalito parent, the Lighthouse Caf}, the Lighthouse Diner in San Rafael features a surprisingly interesting dinner menu. Dishes are both Danish and American, and there's more complexity in the cooking than you'd expect from the name and the simple yet comfortable interior. Most of the seating is in padded booths; a pleasant, umbrella-shaded outdoor dining patio faces the Court Street Plaza fountain.

Leslie Harlib can be reached at [lharlib@marini.com](mailto:lharlib@marini.com).

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