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Truth in gourmet advertising in Pine Brook

You gotta love capitalism. In a never-ending strategy to prove to the buying public that one buy's products are better than the next guy's, business owners use words like "spectacular" and "amazing" - and even "once-in-a-lifetime" - so often, superlatives have just about lost their meaning.

It's no different when it comes to food. Sometimes I think if I hear/read/see one

**TASTE
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more sign with the word "gourmet" in it, well, let's just say my reaction won't be pretty. I used to think gourmet meant something rare and extraordinary; only now it's used so commonly, it can mean a deli uses a better brand of cold cuts.

It's no wonder I get suspicious when I'm told

about a gourmet shop these days - so often it means spinach wraps and chicken Caesar salads. So I didn't have high expectations when my friend Jan and I visited The Fruited Plain back in November. We were spending the afternoon together, and that was good enough for me - if I came up with a good story, it would be a bonus.

Well, it turns out The Fruited Plain is way more than a bonus. In fact, I'd say Rosemary and Drew Gabbe are cooking some of the finest food I've eaten at a takeout shop in a very long time.

I had an idea we were in for something special when I learned each is a chef with an impressive résumé: His includes fine hotels in Switzerland and chef of The Terrace restaurant at the Hilton Short Hills; hers, at

New York's Le Bernardin and Lespinasse. They met during a stint at the Four Seasons hotel in the city, married, moved to

New Jersey and had twin girls, Jenna and Alena, now 3 years old and so cute it makes you laugh.

With a growing family, it wasn't easy keeping to typical chefs' hours, which can easily run 12-14 hours a day, to say nothing of weekends and holidays. So they talked it over and decided it would be easier to open a retail store where they could cook what they knew and maintain a semblance of a normal family routine.

They chose this Pine Brook location in the winter of 2003. It was an empty space when they found it, and Drew designed the kitchen and the shop itself, taking several months to get it right. They opened in July, and at this point, Rosemary cooks and Drew works the front of the store - but both say they're open to switching jobs at any time.

Their training at the Four Seasons taught them to pull a lot of things out of a hat. The hotel's motto of providing anything a guest might want gave them a versatility that has served them well at The Fruited Plain. They got used to serving an international clientele, and loved the challenge. On any given day, you can find Ukrainian borscht and New England clam chowder, Indonesian satay and Santa Fe chili on the store's menu.

There are two or three fresh entrees daily, several accompaniments, six or seven salads and a slew of house-made desserts. There are also artisan breads and about 20 interesting cheeses. In the freezer case, dozens of frozen entrees, sides, hors d'oeuvres, soups, sauces and dips make dinner a breeze. For a quick bite, Drew will make you a sandwich to go, or try a wonderful pear haystack muffin (\$1.25) dipped in butter, cinnamon and sugar while you shop, like I did.

Catherine Citrano, Rosemary's mom, helps out in the kitchen, as does Alyssa Jenkins, an old friend of Rosemary and a CIA-trained pastry chef. As I write, I can tell you I'm craving the Sicilian chicken (\$9.99 per pound) and the veal osso buco - my two favorite dishes. The chicken is actually Citrano's recipe and a family favorite. Pieces of tender chicken on the bone with olives, apricots, figs and green peppercorns - a salty and sweet delight - are braised in their own liquid with brown sugar, red wine and thyme. Yum.

A stellar osso buco (\$17.99 per pound) is without doubt the finest I've had. Seasoned perfectly, with luscious marrow and sweet, stewed vegetables, it is impossible to leave any on the plate.

Lightly curried chicken salad (\$9.99) is sweet and creamy, with a slight kick of curry powder, toasted almonds, cilantro, raisins, scallions and mayo. I didn't try the crab cakes (\$3.99

each), the pepper-crust roast loin of pork, the grilled lemon chicken (\$8.99 per pound) or the tabbouleh (\$5.99 per pound). But the spaghetti squash primavera was spunky and fun, and the ratatouille of garden vegetables (\$7.99) would be a great accompaniment to anything from portobellos to beef.

On my second visit, the veggie of the day was excellent roasted cauliflower tossed with a little olive oil, garlic and curry (\$5.99 per pound); another day it was creamy spinach gratin. I was too busy with real food to try a sandwich, but you can choose from about 20, like Baja chicken (\$6.50, with avocado, romaine lettuce, grilled onions, tomatoes, chipotle mayo on ciabatta) or smoked salmon stack (\$6.95, with dill havarti, cucumber, red onion, lettuce, tomatoes and caper mayo on black bread).



PHOTOS BY M. KATHLEEN KELLY FOR THE STAR-LEDGER
Drew and Rosemary Gabbe prepare their favorite Marsala sauce in the Pine Brook shop.



The display case at Fruited Plain is loaded with delicacies.

Soups to go (\$6.95 per quart) come in about 40 flavors, including roasted cauliflower, Cajun white bean and andouille sausage, cream of spaghetti squash, gingered sweet potatoes and leeks, and roasted fennel and cannellini beans.

The Gabbes do a lot of catering at The Fruited Plain, and my mouth waters when I think my next dinner party could include Sicilian chicken and veal osso buco. While I was there, two customers came in to pick up large orders, including Wendy Sefcik of Towaco, who assured me "people are raving about this place."

No doubt. With Lent here and St. Patrick's Day coming up fast, there are lots of reasons to serve your guests great food. Some of it from The Fruited Plain will no doubt be green, but all of it will probably be wonderful.

I've eaten at almost all the restaurants where Rosemary and Drew Gabbe have worked, and I can tell you that the food at The Fruited Plain is as inventive and exciting as it was at Le Bernardin, Lespinasse and the Four Seasons hotel. The fact that you can have it on your table for dinner tonight is nothing short of a gift - a true gourmet gift, that is.

"Taste of New Jersey" appears every other week in Savor. Please send news of your favorite finds with your name and telephone numbers to Savor, "Taste of New Jersey," The Star-Ledger, 1 Star-Ledger Plaza, Newark, N.J. 07102. All submissions become the property of The Star-Ledger and will not be returned; submissions may be edited and may be published or otherwise reused in any medium.

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