

FLORIDA WEEKLY CUISINE

Survey Café melds fresh flavors with tasteful tidbits from yesteryear

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More often than not, today's restaurants are sleek and contemporary, designed to reflect modern taste and style.

That owners Lori and Ben Nelson chose not to do that when they designed Survey Café is only one reason for which they are to be commended.

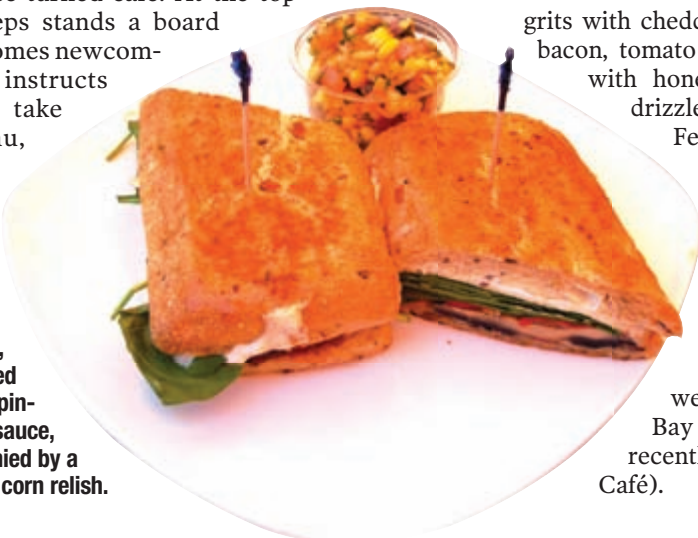
The café sits within and around a meticulously restored 1940s-era, wood-frame house just off Old 41 on Wilson Street, slightly south of Terry Street, in the downtown area. My dining companion raised a quizzical eyebrow as I turned onto this seemingly residential route, only to raise the other to match it in delighted surprise as we spotted the quaint house, its broad deck outfitted with tables and chairs shaded by large golden yellow umbrellas.

A bit of background before we get to the, uh, meat of the story. This Southern café with old-fashioned charm and free WiFi takes its name from history. In the 1870s, surveyors set up camp in the area near a spring that local Indians believed had healing powers. The site became known as Survey, and the stream that was the source of the spring was dubbed Surveyor's Creek.

In 1912, investors bought 2,400 acres around Survey and laid out a small town. After determining the name lacked the panache required to attract buyers, they renamed the town Bonita Springs and the body of water became the Imperial River.

Now flash forward almost a full century and climb the wooden steps of the little house-turned-café. At the top of the steps stands a board that welcomes newcomers and instructs them to take a menu,

A Portobello panini contains a grilled mushroom, brie, roasted peppers, spinach and sauce, accompanied by a side of corn relish.



KAREN FELDMAN / FLORIDA WEEKLY

A pretty fountain gurgles near tables on the large deck around Survey Café in Bonita Springs.

choose any seat they like and head up to the counter to order once they've decided what they want to eat. That requires going inside — where there are a few tables and chairs — although it was such a spectacular day, sunny with a gentle breeze, that no one was indoors except the kitchen staff.

The menu features an intriguing assortment of dishes, including buttermilk biscuits, alligator cakes, flatbreads, salads and smoothies. There are omelets and breakfast sandwiches earlier in the day and, on Friday and Saturday nights, a slightly expanded menu featuring sliders, shrimp and scallop ceviche and sides such as Southern

grits with cheddar, spinach, bacon, tomato and onions with honey balsamic drizzle. Chef John Federici is in charge of the kitchen (you may have tasted his food a while back at Maxwell's on the Bay or, more recently, at Wyld's Café).

The counter boasts a display area that showcases fresh baked goods, including cookies, little chocolate cupcakes topped with peanut butter icing and Key lime pie.

We ordered, paid our bill and settled at an outdoor table to wait. Oldies played on a radio — yes, radio — station, and a gurgling fountain muted the sound of traffic on Old 41.

In just a few minutes, our drinks arrived: a mango madness smoothie (\$4.50) and a chai latte (12 ounces, although I failed to note the price). The smoothie was a luscious blend of mangoes and organic juice, banana and organic vanilla yogurt. It was sweet but not overly so, tasting as bright and sunny as the day itself. The chai was creamy, gently spiced and just hot enough.

Our sandwiches arrived not long after the beverages. Both the Portobello panini (\$9.95) and the Nelson's reuben (\$7.95) looked appealing in their simple presentations on a plate with a single side (choices include corn relish, cole slaw and potato salad).

The reuben consisted of a thick layer



The classic reuben consists of corned beef, Russian dressing, sauerkraut and Swiss cheese, with a side of potato salad.

of corned beef (turkey is the other option) topped with sauerkraut, Swiss cheese and a thin layer of Russian dressing on lightly toasted marbled rye. Although I prefer the heartier New York style rye bread, this had good flavor. The fillings were good, too, and were applied in moderation so that it was possible to pick up the sandwich without it dripping all over, not an easy balance to achieve.

The panini contained a grilled Portobello mushroom along with spinach, brie, roasted peppers, horseradish sauce and a touch of raspberry vinaigrette on pressed ciabatta bread. A little more horseradish sauce would have been nice,

if you go

Survey Café,
10530 Wilson St., Bonita Springs;
992-2233

Ratings:
Food: ★★★★★
Service: ★★★★★½
Atmosphere: ★★★★★½

>> Hours: Breakfast served 7:30-10:30 a.m. Monday-Saturday; lunch served 10:30-3 p.m. Monday-Saturday; dinner served 5-9 p.m. Friday and Saturday (November through April); brunch served 7:30-3 p.m. Sunday. Note: The café will close at 10:30 a.m. Sunday, Nov. 21, for Taste of Bonita.

>> Reservations: Accepted for dinner

>> Credit cards: Accepted

>> Price range: Breakfast, \$4.95-\$10.95; lunch, \$5.50-\$9.95; dinner, appetizers, \$4.95-\$8.95, entrees, \$10.50-\$12.95

>> Beverages: Beer and wine served.

>> Seating: Tables indoors and on the outdoor deck

>> Specialties of the house: Bonita's breakfast wrap, Survey smothered bagel, omelets, veggie wrap, chicken cordon bleu flatbread, Grandpa's gator cakes, Portobello Panini, smoothies, Key lime pie

>> Volume: Low

>> Parking: Free lot

>> Website: www.thesurveycafe.com

★★★★★ Superb
★★★★ Noteworthy
★★★ Good
★★ Fair
★ Poor

but that's a personal preference and may well be just fine as is for someone else.

The corn relish contained bits of orange, tomato and parsley, which I liked better than my companion did. The potato salad was creamy, with chunks of red potatoes and onion.

We shared a slice of rich Key lime pie, which had an intense lime flavor and a light graham cracker crust.

Before we knew it, we were finished with lunch, although we were tempted to order coffee. The café serves organic, shade-grown, carbon footprint-free, free trade coffee from Grounds for Change. Alas, it was time to return to the real world and a host of weekend chores.

The Survey Café is literally a breath of fresh air at a time when there are so many establishments striving to be hip. It's a peaceful, welcoming spot where the food and the splendor that is Southwest Florida can — and do — shine. ■

food & wine CALENDAR

> Thursday, Nov. 18, 5-8 p.m., Gulf Points Liquors and Fine Wines: Sample a variety of wines rated 90 or higher by Wine Spectator or Wine Advocate (Robert Parker); \$10 (includes \$10 credit toward purchase that evening), 15561 McGregor Blvd., Fort Myers; 472-7777. Reservations required.

> Thursday, Nov. 18, 6:30 p.m., Hemingway's: Enjoy a multi-course meal paired with wines; \$36.95, Coconut Point, 8001 Plaza del Lago, Estero; 495-7240.

> Friday and Saturday, Nov. 19-20, times vary, Snook Bight Marina: The second annual All Aboard Against

Breast Cancer Waterside Festival takes place at the marina, 4765 Estero Blvd. (behind the Publix Shopping Center) on Fort Myers Beach. The event begins with a wine tasting (5:30-6:30 p.m.) then wine dinner and auction at Bayfront Bistro on Friday, Nov. 19, followed by the waterfront festival the following day that includes a boat show, live music, games, a barbecue, silent auction and raffle. The wine dinner is \$100 per person and reservations are required. Call 765-4371 for reservations. The festival is free. For details, visit www.snookbightmarina.com.

> Sunday, Nov. 21, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Riv-

erside Park: The 17th annual Taste of Bonita features a variety of area restaurants serving up their specialties, along with music and more; admission free, tickets will be sold to use toward food purchases, Old 41 and Pennsylvania Avenue, Bonita Springs; 273-7430.

> Sunday, Nov. 21, noon-5 p.m., Sanibel Community Park: The 29th Taste of the Islands features some 20 restaurants preparing their specialties for the fundraiser that benefits Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife (C.R.O.W.); \$5 at the gate of \$20 for five in advance at C.R.O.W., 3883 Sanibel-Captiva Road, and Bank of the Islands, 1699 Periwinkle Way,

Sanibel; 395-0048.

> Friday, Dec. 3, 6-8 p.m., Bell Tower Shops: The 12th annual Chocolate and Spirits Festival features chocolate creations are area restaurants and businesses, a variety of spirits, live music and a silent auction to benefit the Lee County Library System's Southwest Florida Reading Festival, set for March 19, 2011; tickets for tastings are \$1 each, U.S. 41 and Daniels Parkway, Fort Myers; 479-4636.

— Submit event listings to Cuisine@floridaweekly.com.

