



BY PHOTOS / ANOLIE SWARTZ

Citronnelle

Outstanding French-style cuisine with an attention to detail

Order dessert first. Seriously. You don't have to eat it first, just order it before the rest of your meal so that the Signature Citronnelle Souffle will arrive at your table – puffed up, golden-topped and steaming with the scent of lemongrass – as the finale to an outstanding meal at downtown Lancaster's new upscale dining spot.

Citronnelle, co-owned by Susan Louie and her husband, chef Rafael Perez, serves beautifully prepared French-style cuisine without pretense.

Louie and Perez tried out several recipes before settling on the lemongrass essence as the perfect flavor for their signature dessert. But their encounters with the herb on their honeymoon in the Seychelles solidified both the name and the menu at the restaurant.

Citronnelle is the French word for lemongrass – the bright, citrusy herb Louie says is global and versatile. She remembers her father, a formidable Chinese chef, using it. Louie is not a chef – her father wouldn't let her in the kitchen when she was little – but she is a world-traveled foodie.

The cooking at Citronnelle is in the hands of chef Perez, who trained in classic French cooking early in his career in New York City and later became a pastry chef.

Serving sweets is a family trait. Perez comes from the Dominican Republic, where his aunt owned a sweet shop. She made desserts using ingredients

ranging from milk to caramel to sweet potato. "Dulce de everything!" Louie says, laughing.

The souffle is accompanied by a small pitcher of coconut creme anglaise. When it's set on your table you have to stab the confection with your knife and pour the creme anglaise into the center of the souffle. The creme seeps into a multitude of air pockets and the

do just that. But if you do, you'll miss out on the pretty plates of appetizers, the seriously good sides and the carefully created (the full menu took six months to finalize) main courses.

All of Citronnelle's dishes are designed with local ingredients prepared using traditional French techniques, with a twist. Even with his formal training, Perez says he "can't just do French."

The night I had dinner at Citronnelle, my friend and I ordered the souffle, then turned our attention to the appetizers, which are listed on the menu as first courses. With no hesitation, my friend declared she would have the crispy artichoke salad. I dithered between the wild mushroom sous croute (how could I turn down chive pastry and tomato confit in the summer?) and the warm beluga lentil terrine.

I went with the terrine because I had seen a photo of the dish featured on Citronnelle's website. Plus, it came with a trickle of harissa oil, a hot chili condiment common in Tunisia and other parts of North Africa, where I've traveled.

The terrine was (just as I'd seen it pictured) a mound of black lentils on a disc of house-made

Merguez sausage (also common in North Africa). It was in turns chewy and tender, spicy and savory, with the dark flavors brightened by heat of the harissa and the near-licorice lift of shaved fennel that topped the dish. It lived up to its advertising.



final creation – a sweet mix of tropical flavors, custard and tender crust confection – can be eaten in warm, moist spoonfuls.

You *could* skip the meal and go to Citronnelle for dessert. Louie says there's a growing number of guests who

My friend's salad was a constructed masterpiece of vegetables done right. The small artichokes were fried without a heavy coating; they melted under my fork and in my mouth.

The parmesan bowl that held the arugula and lemon chips (lightly dressed in a garlic creme vinaigrette) broke into perfect crouton-like chips when we cut into it. This was no exploding, awkward, taco salad situation – it was centuries of techniques developed in France, applied to Italian cheese and served by a Dominican chef who knows how to use both cheese and technique to his advantage.

I'm fairly certain my friend would have snacked on the lemon chips for the rest of the meal if we'd ordered a side of them. But instead we ordered a side of brussel sprouts with fried shallots and lardons, because we thought it would pair well with her sea bass and my short rib bordelaise. It did. And again, the flavors and textures of the side worked together: the slight bitter of the sprouts, the gamey salt of the cubed lardons and the crunch of the shallots.

I realized I should have taken more time to discuss the menu and ask about preparations when my black Angus short rib bordelaise arrived and was not, as I'd expected, a fork tender, slow-cooked cut of beef, but more of a grilled steak preparation. The flavor was rich, although the meat was a bit tough for my tastes.

My friend quizzed the waiter extensively about the salsa verde that accompanied her sea bass (she hates chopped tomatoes and onions) and was delighted by the sauce that was more aioli than chip-dip. The local summer vegetables that came with our second course entrees were different on each plate – a nice attention to detail.

Over dessert – the aforementioned signature Citronnelle souffle – Louie, Perez, my friend and I talked about food and drink and travel. We were not the only guests who the owners spoke to that night. The small restaurant, with its comfortable chairs, dark woods and rich umber tones, invites conversation.

Citronnelle is B.Y.O.B. and plans to stay that way. The cost of a liquor license is prohibitive, Louie says. Besides, she believes that guests like to bring their favorite bottles of wine – or even dive into their own cellars – when eating great food.

Citronnelle has an extensive and unusual tea menu, and also serves coffee and espresso. If you time your ordering just right, you can have an Asian herb-infused French dessert with an Italian coffee in the middle of Amish country.

Global, indeed.

• 110 West Orange Street, Lancaster; 208-6697

• Tuesday-Thursday, 5:30-10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5:30-11 p.m.; and Sunday, 11 a.m.-3 p.m.

• Entree prices: \$9-\$29

• Wheelchair accessible, credit cards accepted, completely nonsmoking, reservations preferred, B.Y.O.B., takeout not available