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Uplift the Taste

Morgan Hill's Ragoots elevates familiar favorites with upscale comfort food

By Cheryl Sternman Rule

SAY you've lived in the same place for 20 years and were tired of leaving town to find the food you love. What do you do?

Open your own restaurant and start serving it yourself.

That's what Colleene and Robert Isaacs, along with business partner Elaine Stoddard, did with Ragoots, their year-old cinnamon-and-honey-colored eatery in downtown Morgan Hill. In addition to a full menu of California-inspired comfort food, Ragoots also sells specialty goods like high-end oils, honeys and wines, and until recently they even offered "home meal replacements"—chef-prepared dishes requiring 10 minutes of at-home attention for those who prefer "cooking" in their own kitchens. This last part of the venture never quite took hold; turns out even 10 minutes proved too much for the area's time-starved locals. Next month, Ragoots will shift gears, offering "curbside" takeout for those desiring ready-to-eat fare.

Really, though, with a space as comfortable, low-key and pleasant as Ragoots' dining room, families might as well eat on-site. Earth-toned granite two-tops and four-tops fill half the bright space. A central hub dominates the other half where customers used to place their orders and pay for their meals. (Table service is now standard, another change based on diners' feedback.) Racks filled with specialty foods line one wall, with overflow items stacked around a corner.

Ragoots deserves kudos for its adaptability, but its greatest triumph is the food, which hits the mark time after time. The menu's list of recognizable favorites all offer a gourmet kick—salade niçoise salad with salmon instead of tuna; flatiron steak with blue cheese-herb butter; smoked salmon and prosciutto fettuccini. Menus like this can sometimes falter: they may pull out all the gourmet stops, touting high-end ingredients and jacked-up prices, but they don't always deliver. Ragoots delivers. The upscale ingredients work the way they're supposed to—elevating humble favorites (salad, meat, pasta, sandwiches) with thoughtful preparations that heighten rather than muddle traditional flavors. And prices are reasonable too.

The meatloaf entree (\$12.50) is a good example. Stuffed with pine nuts, sun-dried tomatoes and shitake mushrooms, the modernized classic is served with caramelized onions, reduced red wine and garlicky mashed new potatoes. The meat was a bit rarer than expected, but the flavors sang.

Thick triangles of herb-flecked polenta (\$12.95), another substantial entree, paired nicely with chopped grilled chicken, sliced mushrooms and a soothing, almost brothy white wine sauce. Sautéed arugula provided a welcome, bitter contrast.



Photograph by Felipe Buitrago
What Mother Should Have Made: Salmon niçoise at Ragoots



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A warm Reuben (\$8.75) arrived in all its corned-beef-and-Russian-dressing glory, generous slices of meat blanketed with sauerkraut and Swiss, piled high between slices of grilled rye. And the sweet barbecue sauce on a pulled pork sandwich (\$7.95) was spot-on; the sandwich disappeared from my plate in minutes. An array of well-composed salads, like the Mediterranean veggie salad (8.95) with fresh, marinated and grilled vegetables, are also worth ordering.

Though you really don't need side dishes, Ragoots offers "accompaniments" for \$3.99 a pop, and the two I tried justified the trek to Morgan Hill. "Not your mom's mac and cheese" and a creamy cauliflower gratin are decadent without being gloppy. The 8-year-old at my table got peeved when the rest of us kept pilfering bites of his cheesy pasta. Follow our lead and encourage kids to skip the boxed mac and cheese on the children's menu and go for the homemade adult version. It's better, and cheaper too.

Bursting the bubble of this all-too-pleasant neighborhood dining experience is the amateur service. Two consecutive servers couldn't identify the cheeses or spreads on a beautifully conceived seasonal sampler plate (\$12.95). On another visit, our earnest waitress hadn't a clue what the restaurant's quirky name meant and didn't offer to find out. (Stoddard later explained it's a made-up, Americanized cross between *gouter* and *ragouter*, French verbs meaning "to taste" and "to make a stew.") Dirty plates sat uncleared and the check arrived before we could ask for dessert. Servers are young and very friendly, and no one's expecting perfection, but a bit more training in the fundamentals would help do justice to the food.

Don't fret, though, for sweets make everything OK and the pastry chef does a bang-up job. A rich, dense flourless chocolate cake (\$6.25) is ideal for sharing. Equally wonderful are a warm apple "pippin cake" (\$6.25) served with vanilla ice cream and a drizzle of caramel and the several types of cheesecake (\$6.25). There's no deep fryer at Ragoots, so expend any saved calories on dessert. It's well worth it.

Ragoots is the kind of casual place with terrific food I wish I had in my own neighborhood. I'd be a regular in a heartbeat.

Ragoots

Address: 17305 Monterey Rd., Morgan Hill.

Phone: 408.201.9200.

Hours: 11:30am-9pm Tue-Sat.

Cuisine: California comfort food.

Price Range: \$7-\$16.

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