

Restaurant Review

Craving Comfort? These Local Spots Offer Fare to Please the Whole Family

By Cheryl Sternman Rule

Live Oak Kitchen

15531 Union Ave., Los Gatos. 408-371-7602

With its well-worn wooden furniture, half-curtains on the windows, and black and white photos lining the walls, Live Oak Kitchen is a far cry from trendy. But when you're craving comfort food, Live Oak – with its friendly wait staff, reasonable prices and tables filled with locals of all ages – fits the bill just fine.

The menu spans all the classic '50s favorites – from meatloaf and mashed potatoes to Salisbury steak, fish and chips and burgers. The kids at my table enjoyed their pizza and spaghetti just as much here as they would have in a fancier, pricier establishment. The pizza (\$5.95 for the kids' size or \$10.95 if you want leftovers) arrived golden brown, topped with a thick layer of gooey mozzarella. The spaghetti and meat sauce (\$5.95) was super-soft – nothing *al dente* about it. My beef stroganoff (\$9.95) was sheer comfort: lightly sauced fettuccini with mushrooms, thinly sliced beef and a dollop of sour cream. This is by no means gourmet fare, but when you want straightforward, unfussy food, you'll find it at Live Oak Kitchen.

Pros: Plenty of highchairs; warm service; kids' menu; classic, '50s-style comfort food

Cons: No changing table, dated décor, bathroom in dire need of a remodel

Gunther's Restaurant & Catering

1601 Meridian Ave., San Jose. 408-266-9022

It may be my personal bias, but a comfort-food restaurant worth its salt should offer unimpeachable rice pudding. By that admittedly subjective criteria, Gunther's is hands-down my new favorite, kid-friendly eatery. The rice pudding arrived warm with a mountain of whipped cream – the rice soft, the raisins plump, and the eggy custard base sweet and soothing. The four kids at my table had to fight me for the last spoonful.

The menu stretches far and wide, covering home-style classics anyone with an Italian, Jewish or German grandmother would recognize instantly.

Open since 1971, Gunther's offers homemade soups, deli sandwiches, baked chicken, veal parmesan and countless other meat-based entrees (\$6.95-14.95). Portions are enormous and service is extremely friendly. Plus, since you order at the counter, you and your children can see most of the food on display before making your selections. The kids at my table enjoyed a huge portion of cheese lasagna, a messy but wonderful Reuben sandwich and a giant plate of corned beef and cabbage. With St. Patrick's Day this month, why take the kids to a rowdy Irish pub when you can get your corned-beef fix at Gunther's?

Pros: Highchairs, wide variety of comfort-food classics, friendly atmosphere

Cons: No changing tables, portion sizes and prices geared towards larger appetites



Noah, 9, and Talia, 11, Hoffman of San Jose enjoy their comforting, overstuffed sandwiches at Gunther's.

PHOTO BY CHERYL STERNMAN RULE

Ragoos

17305 Monterey Road, Morgan Hill. 408-201-9200

Sometimes you're seeking downscale comfort and sometimes, frankly, you're seeking upscale comfort. Ragoos offers familiar favorites with a gourmet kick. It's a great place for the whole family where the food is a cut above that offered at most kid-friendly establishments.

Adults will enjoy the meatloaf (\$8.95) with pine nuts, sun-dried tomatoes and a red-wine reduction. Also excellent was the pulled-pork

sandwich (\$8.50) with its wonderful sweet and sour barbecue sauce. Kids can order off the children's menu, which offers box-style macaroni and cheese, chicken tenders, noodles and pizza (all \$4.95 with apple slices or carrots). A word of advice: The "not your mom's mac and cheese," listed as a "side" on the adult menu, is outstanding, and, at \$5.95, only slightly more expensive than the boxed kid's version. Talk about comfort food!

Save room for the house-made, calorie-dense desserts. They're worth it.

Pros: Delicious, upscale comfort food; pretty décor; highchairs and changing tables

Cons: Morgan Hill is a bit of a drive for those in the northern part of Santa Clara County

Cheryl Sternman Rule is a San Jose-based food writer, restaurant reviewer and mother of two school-age boys.