

Keeping it simple at the Skylark Café

BY ROB ROEDEL

Leslie's slogan is "One of Arkansas' best kept secrets," but as more people find out about the Skylark Café the town may have to change the slogan

Leslie, located in Searcy County, is just off of U.S. 65 and offers an attractive array of offerings for visitors, including homes on the National Historic Register and a restored historic downtown with antique shops, gift shops and inviting cafes.

One of the cafes is the Skylark Café, which Joy Mayes opened in December 2009. The establishment, a renovated 100-year-old home on the National Historic Register, is located directly across from the Ozark Heritage Arts Center and Museum. Mayes' family owned and operated another Leslie restaurant while she was growing up. She began working in the restaurant when she was 8-years-old and did so

until the family sold the business.

When she decided to open her own café, there was one small issue. She had never really cooked!

"I had an idea for the atmosphere of the restaurant," Mayes said. "We visited several restaurants and collected menus when we were developing our menu."

She said that her plan was to offer homemade sides and keep the menu simple. Mayes opted to use as many fresh ingredients as possible.

"When I opened the café, I thought I knew what I was doing, but I learned quickly that I had much to learn," she said. "It has now gone very well. People love our food, and I love cooking for other people."

"I haven't had anything here that I just didn't love," said Mary Ramos of Oxly, who was dining with Nancy Sutterfield of Big Flat. The ladies were enjoying their favorite Skylark special,

a smoked ham and cheese sandwich with a side of spinach cheese dip.

True to Mayes' plan, the Skylark Café's eclectic two-page menu is simple and uses fresh ingredients to make delicious food.

"We do things a little different than most restaurants in our area by using natural oils like soybean and coconut oil to grill and bake your food," Mayes said. "We don't use fryers."

I had reviewed the menu before visiting the Skylark Café and wondered what the staff would allow me to sample during my visit. I was not disappointed when the food was prepared and served by some of the most



The Skylark Café in Leslie.

personable and fun ladies that I had met in a while. The regulars told me that the small town "comfort" food and service the staff offers is beyond compare.

The first dish I was offered was an appetizer of spinach cheese dip and fresh homemade salsa. The dip was absolutely "yum-o" and the salsa had a nice texture with a cool, but spicy flavor. I dipped many chips as each bite was better than the last.

It was a little chilly when I visited and the next dish, homemade French onion soup, hit the spot. The soup featured a generous layer of rich cheese that melted perfectly into the tasty French onion broth.

Next, I was treated to the "Jumping Chuy Ciabatta" sandwich. This innovative creation featured grilled chicken with green chili sauce, grilled onions, chipotle mayonnaise, pepper jack cheese, lettuce and tomato on a grilled ciabatta bun. The café's bread is produced by Neighbor's Mill in Harrison. The healthy sandwich was a generous portion and the perfect blend of flavors with a nice little kick for the taste buds.

The "Oriental Salad" was then delivered to my table. This salad, one of six offered, features sesame-marinated grilled chicken with mandarin oranges, cucumbers, green onions and sliced almonds on a bed of spring mix and romaine lettuce. It was served with a



(L-R) Kaylyn Cardello, Joy Mayes, owner, and Genevieve

Pollard serve up strawberry pie.

the eating essentials

SKYLARK CAFÉ

401 High Street, Leslie
870.447.2354

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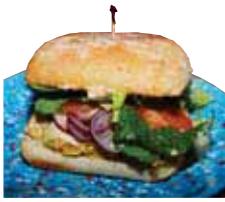
Hours of Operation

Monday - Thursday: 11 a.m. - 3 p.m.

Friday: 11 a.m. - 8:30 p.m.

Saturday: 11 a.m. - 3 p.m.

superb poppy seed dressing and fresh sourdough bread.



The menu also has a "South of the Border" section that offers visitors quesadillas, burritos and homemade chili. I was served the "Veggie Quesadilla." The flour tortilla was grilled to a nice crispy state and was filled with grilled peppers, onions, tomatoes, black beans, corn and shredded cheese. It was presented with sliced avocado and more of the great homemade salsa.

The desserts at the Skylark Café are very popular and many of them are prepared by local resident Vicki Lewis, whose family owned the Skylark's historic location for three generations. I asked which of the café's dessert offerings was most popular. Without hesitation, Mayes grinned and said, "The strawberry pie! People drive for miles to come and get it."

After trying the pie, I could see why. It features a graham cracker crust, a smorgasbord of strawberries with a beautiful glaze topped with whipped cream that is sprinkled with additional graham cracker crumbs. The locals have nicknamed the pie, "The Diet Buster." Even after sampling the other items during my visit, I still managed to eat the entire piece of pie. Bite after bite it got better and better. I even licked my fork when no one was looking.

In addition to the regulars and other visitors, tour groups have discovered the Skylark Café and designated it as a permanent stopping location.

Daily specials are offered for the lunch crowd and the menu is expanded for dinner to include such offerings as sesame pineapple chicken, fettuccine alfredo and pork tenderloin.

For a wonderful dining experience featuring healthy food prepared by and served by a warm, friendly team, you can't beat the Skylark Café. ■

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