

CULINARY CAPITAL

RHINEBECK HAS BECOME THE HUDSON VALLEY DINING DESTINATION

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Caption: PHOTOS BY STEVE JACOBS/TIMES UNION CARNE CRUDA is the name of this antipasto dish at **Gigi Trattoria**. Hand-chopped truffled Kobe beef tartare is blanketed with sliced figs and topped with local arugula and shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano. THE BEEKMAN ARMS INN at the heart of Rhinebeck is home to the Traphagen Restaurant. Beekman Arms is the oldest continuously operating inn in the United States. AT THE ACCLAIMED CALICO on Mill Street, there is a lunch menu, a dinner menu and a pastry menu, all prepared daily by chef-owner Anthony Balassone and his wife, Leslie, the pastry chef. AN OPEN WINDOW separates the two dining rooms at **Gigi Trattoria**. The restaurant opened in September 2001 and was the first of at least five restaurants and bakeries to set up shop in Rhinebeck in recent years.

If you're visiting Rhinebeck and develop a pastry craving, you may have a problem: Which shop do you go to? There are three first-rate bakeries to choose from, each with its own specialties and each less than a two-minute walk from the one traffic light in the heart of the picturesque Dutchess County village.

At Calico, a restaurant and patisserie across from the historic Beekman Arms Inn, the fresh fruit tarts and hand-dipped truffles look like works of art. The wood-fired oven-baked baguettes and croissants at Bread Alone Bakery on East Market Street are world-class. At Pandemain on Garden Street, baker and co-owner Richard Acker toils long hours making savory, miniature sour cream coffee cakes and other delights.

If that's not enough to make you salivate, consider A Spot of Tea, a couple doors east of Bread Alone. It serves crumpets, homemade scones and clotted cream. Decisions, decisions. And we're talking only about a snack, a pastry. Try deciding what you want for dinner and the problem becomes that much more perplexing. Are you in the mood for French or Italian, Mexican or Japanese, nouvelle American, fusion or Latin world cuisine? All of those choices and more await. There are at least 17 eateries (including bakeries and delis) in Rhinebeck and a growing number of restaurants just beyond the village limits. Is there any town of 3,077 anywhere in America that offers so many tantalizing food options in three square blocks?

Situated halfway between Albany and Manhattan, just east of the Hudson River on Route 9, Rhinebeck is an upscale version of Norman Rockwell's small-town America. It isn't the

biggest town between New York state's capital and the Big Apple, but it is the restaurant epicenter of the Hudson Valley, a dining destination for food lovers.

Yet that wasn't the case a mere five years ago. Many, if not the majority, of Rhinebeck's restaurants have opened in the past four years.

"It's amazing, a phenomenon that I don't think anybody could have predicted," says Thomas Griffiths, a certified master chef and professor at the Culinary Institute of America, a short drive down Route 9 from Rhinebeck. "Rhinebeck has exploded with restaurants, really good, interesting restaurants."

Griffiths moved from downstate to Rhinebeck 10 years ago. He remembers having just four dining options at that time: 1776 Restaurant at the venerable Beekman Arms, Foster's Coach House Tavern & Restaurant, Le Petit Bistro and Calico.

"We were drawn to Rhinebeck because it's charming and quaint," Griffiths adds. "Ten years ago, it was a little quiet, but in the past few years there are bistros and trattorias popping up along with trendy shops. Yet Rhinebeck is still quaint and elegant. It's not overbuilt.

"You watch these restaurants grow, and the caliber's gotten more upscale. At the same time, there are still plenty of reasonably priced places, too."

If one restaurant gets credit for starting the trend, it is Gigi's Trattoria. Owner Laura Pensiero, a French Culinary Institute graduate, registered dietitian and cookbook author, opened her sophisticated yet casual restaurant on Montgomery Street (Route 9) in September 2001, two weeks after the most horrific day in modern American history.

It was a hit from the get-go. Locals and New Yorkers who had fled the city after 9/11 were thrilled to come to a fun, lively restaurant featuring ingredients from Hudson Valley farms.

"The timing of the opening of Gigi's was absolutely perfect," Pensiero says. "It was what what people wanted at that moment."

Since then, Rhinebeck native John Varricchio and a partner took over at the Beekman Arms and renamed it The Traphagen Restaurant, and a host of new places have opened their doors in Rhinebeck. They include, in alphabetical order: Bread Alone Bakery, Pandemain Bakery, Phoenix Rising, Sabroso and Terrapin Bistro & Restaurant.

"I think Laura is the one who got the ball rolling," notes Leslie Coon, managing editor at Hudson Valley Table, a quarterly regional magazine devoted to food, farms and restaurants. "Gigi's added a whole other level to the restaurant scene in Rhinebeck, and it's taken off since then."

Not all of the newcomers are new restaurants. Terrapin was doing quite well across the river in West Hurley, Ulster County, before Josh Kroner moved it to Rhinebeck two years ago.

"I looked around and saw that Rhinebeck was the ideal location for a restaurant in the Hudson Valley," he says. "There's a unique dynamic here. It has almost a Hamptons' feel to the town, a very upscale feel. It was a great decision for me."

The nearby Culinary Institute of America is playing an instrumental role in Rhinebeck's development as a dining capital. Students are graduating from the renowned culinary school and staying in the area. Many of Rhinebeck's restaurants boast at least one CIA grad in their kitchen; the owner of A Spot of Tea, Lou Jones, is an instructor at the CIA.

Chef Joseph Dalu and his wife, Jennifer Bell, bought Le Petit Bistro three years ago from Dan Bleen, who was running the front of the house and continues to be the maitre d'. Dalu is a CIA graduate who was the executive chef at Le Petit Bistro at the time he acquired the 42-seat restaurant. "The people in Rhinebeck and the people that come here are such knowledgeable diners," Dalu says. "I serve whole fish on the bone, grilled Mediterranean sardines, things I've encountered problems with in other parts of the country, and they go over big-time here. "There's a real energy around food here. I've seen the farmers markets start to thrive, and more restaurants are buying from valley farmers. Rhinebeck is the capital of the whole movement here. You get streets that are like restaurant rows down in the city, and that's what we've got here."

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