

Cook's Chat

By GraceAnn Walden

Bibby Gignilliat from Parties That Cook

In 1999, Bibby Gignilliat had an idea, "Parties that Cook," and ran with it. After nine years of guerilla marketing, two partners, and housing the office for the company in her home, she is finally able to see the light.

Parties that Cook is a company that creates cooking parties for groups and singles, and team-building events for corporations. It is the premier company of its kind in the Bay Area.

At an event, each team has a professional cook, whose role is to coach a small group of participants. When the food is all prepared, a la *Iron Chef*, her executive chef judges which team did the best job. It's entertaining, educational, and you get to drink wine and schmooze.

Last year Bibby's company grew by 180 percent. Six months ago, she was able to secure a 3,100-square-foot office/warehouse space and garage.

"We were finally able to get a large commercial refrigerator and freezer, and have space to store five sets of equipment, so we can do five events a day," she explains. She went on to say that they don't have to always shop for each "show" at Whole Foods, but can have supplies delivered.

Considering the higher cost of gas and food, and the recession, I asked her if she thinks those factors will adversely affect her business.

She thinks not, although as always with a big upturn like last year's, she expects it will level out



Bibby Gignilliat at The New Spot

this year. Bibby says there is also another train of thought – that individuals and companies, who once might have spent money on trips out of town and expensive retreats, will do fun things locally.

This day, we are meeting near her new commercial space in the up-and-coming Dogpatch neighborhood. Located on the flatlands east of Potrero Hill, this neighborhood once housed immigrants from the British Isles, who originally were lured to San Francisco by the Gold Rush. They and their children and their grandchildren stayed and prospered, working on the nearby wharves and in industry. In modern times, another generation has also worked in Dogpatch. They are the newest immigrants from El Salva-

dor and Mexico.

Bibby, a self-starter, supports the owners of The New Spot because they started from scratch like she did. Julia Rivera and her husband Gilbert have long worked in the neighborhood: she in a shipping department of a local company, and he as a prep cook and cashier at the Jolt 'n Bolt Cafe.

I met Bibby at The New Spot for lunch, the day before she was taking a long-anticipated vacation to Spain. I knew she recommended the cafe for its delicious food, but knowing her hard work to establish her own business, I thought she also wanted to give these two entrepreneurs a boost.

Anywhere in the Mission, which is home to more Central Americans than people of Mexican descent these days, a popular Salvadoran snack is a pupusa – a handmade tortilla masa patted around a filling and then griddled. A pupusa is always served with cortido, a tart cabbage slaw made with cabbage, onions, carrots, and a sprinkle of oregano. You cut a pupusa in half and eat bites of it with a knife and fork, stuffing the cortido in the pupusa. The taste is a mélange of the slightly browned tortilla, the creamy filling of beans and pork, and the sharp cortido, which adds contrast. In the Mission, pupusas usually come with pork and refried beans, beans and cheese, a combo of beans, cheese and pork, or cheese with a Salvadoran flower bud called lorocco.

But the Riveras, according to co-owner Julia Rivera, listened to friends who encouraged them to make pupusas with different fillings like cheese and cactus, spinach and cheese, and mushrooms and goat cheese. All \$2 each. Yum city!

The rest of the menu is filled out with more Salvadoran and Mexican dishes like pasteles de queso, three fried cheese fritters, beef steak, beef tongue in red sauce, and steamed or fried yucca with choice of pork or fried fish. The ubiquitous burritos, tacos and quesadillas also make a showing. But for my money, nothing tops the asparagus and cheese pupusa that I tasted with Bibby.

The New Spot has about 25 seats, which turn quickly, although sometimes there is a line out the door. Julia says 75 percent of their business is take-out. Bravo!

The New Spot: 632 20th St. (at Illinois); Mon-Fri 7 a.m.-7 p.m., Sat-Sun 7-9 p.m., 415-558-0556

Parties That Cook: 601 Minnesota St. (at 18th), Ste. 115, 888-907-2665, www.partiesthatcook.com

Get Across Town: Woodhouse Fish Company

My dad grew up in East Pawtucket, Rhode Island, so he's tough to please when it comes to New England cuisine, be it quahogs or croquettes. A

requisite mineraly overtones that my dad remembers fondly. "Now they just need coffee milk," he grumbled, crunching away. Unfortunately they didn't have steamers on our visit

recent visit to Woodhouse Fish Company, a casual neighborhood spot kitty-corner from Safeway on Market Street, had me a little nervous. I've always loved the place (and I spent my summers in Rhode Island, so I've had a few baked stuffies myself), but my dad, the native, is a much harsher critic. First a platter of briny cherrystones on the half shell came out. He

nodded. A lobster roll – sweet, tender meat lightly dressed with mayo on a buttery toasted flat-sided sweet bun – drew a smile. "It just needs a little celery salt," he said, his New England accent still thicker than bad West Coast chowder even after 40 years in California. Whole-belly Ipswich clams are hard to come by outside of New England, but Woodhouse

flies them in fresh from Maine and fries them in a light crunchy batter. They are not a bit chewy (a sign they are properly cooked), and have the



Above: fried Ipswich clams; below: lobster roll
photo: Tom Jones

(weather plays a big part), but I've been lucky enough to have them at Woodhouse in the past: soft-shell clams that, if you can get past their ugliness, are, as my Sicilian fisherman grandfather used to say, "caramella del mare," or candy of the sea. Pull the black membrane off the siphon and swish the clam through the broth (to remove grit) and then melted

butter. (I'll take that over chocolate any day.) If you want to stick to left coast crustaceans, try the giant artichoke piled with bay shrimp and Dungeness crab, the cheddar crab melt, or the crab Louie roll. Tuesdays are oyster lover heaven: \$1 oysters (and \$4 pints of beer) from 4 until 9:30 p.m.

Woodhouse Fish Company: 2073 Market St. (at Church); daily from 11:45 a.m.; 415-437-2722, www.woodhousefish.com

– S. Reynolds

Get Outta Town East Bay: Speisekammer is serving up wholesome German food in the town that time forgot

Whenever I feel overwhelmed by the City and want to get away to a place that reminds me of simpler times, I head over a bridge or two to Alameda. As I meander down Park Street, I feel as if I am transported back to the set of a 50s' sitcom. I half expect Wally and the Beav to round the corner at any time. But despite the retro feel to the buildings, many of the businesses have a modern sensibility.

Speisekammer is a prime example. The combination of their hearty German fare and beer hall/Elk's lodge atmosphere would make them a popular establishment for the military personnel during the heyday of Alameda's naval base. Yet, by using local, seasonal ingredients, they fit nicely into the current culinary scene.

For our first course, we ordered a Kostritzer black lager and a Welten-

berger Asam bock. Let's face it, when you eat German, the food pairs with the beer. We washed down our mugs of beer with several appetizers. The small bratwursts were nicely seasoned with just a little spice that melded perfectly with the house-made sauerkraut. But, we especially loved the freshly cured pickled herring with sour cream, pickles and apples. We finished the meal with roasted pork in beer sauce, a perfectly cooked thick-cut pork loin chop served with sauerkraut and mashed potatoes, and beef tri-tip aged in red wine and braised until fork tender, served with red cabbage and spätzle. And for dessert, what else? We had more beer.

Speisekammer: 2424 Lincoln Ave. (at Park), Alameda; lunch Fri-Sun from noon, dinner Tue-Sat from 5 p.m., Sunday from 4 p.m.; 510-522-1300, www.speisekammer.com

–B. Knutson

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