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La Tela - Where Passion Persists

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La Tela – Where Passion Persists!

I recently made a trip to Kiawah Island. The Charleston area is one of my favorite spots on earth; a place abundant in Southern charm, outdoor activities, fabulous food, history, clear night skies, and bright blue days. I am not unique in my affection for coastal South Carolina; there are many Lexingtonians who have second homes, kids in college, and ties that bind them to the “Holy City” and nearby beach communities. For all those venturing to paradise sometime soon, I have a dining spot to recommend – La Tela.

After a day of auto travel we unpacked our bags and headed to dinner in Freshfields Village, a cluster of restaurants, shops, and businesses located at the crossroads of Kiawah, Johns Island and Seabrook. We walked into La Tela about 8 pm on a Monday; it was filled to capacity and buzzing with happy patrons. We waited about fifteen minutes for a table, while sipping a lovely glass of red wine and speaking to Angela Rinaldi, one of the proprietors.

Angela, her husband Ed, son Frank, and daughter Rachel own La Tela. Ed is a second generation restaurateur with over thirty years in the business. Frank is a Culinary Institute of America (CIA) graduate. Angela is the general manager; Rachel is the associate manager. The philosophy for their business, in one word, is *care*.

La Tela, is not your typical pizzeria, and exemplifies why I love family-owned restaurants. The pride of product is evident in the fresh ingredients and inventive presentations. Italian food is Rinaldi heritage. Pizza is baked in an Italian wood fire oven, pastas are handcrafted, homemade Italian bread is baked twice daily (Frank has been baking his signature manna for over 33 years), and espresso is freshly ground. The prices are affordable.

The menu is fun to read with enticements like...Beet Salad made with dry roasted beets, baby arugula, dried apricots, ricotta salata, pistachios, and vanilla bean vinaigrette; Sausage Grinders with caramelized onions, mozzarella, and roasted red peppers; your choice of Pasta served with marinara or classic pomodoro with optional sides of alfredo sauce, prosciutto di parma, pancetta or sautéed chicken breast; Quail Egg Pizza with pancetta, mozzarella, parmigiano, reggiano, pecorino romano and cracked black pepper; Tiramisu with house made mascarpone; and vanilla bean and buttermilk Panna Cotta with passion fruit sheet and white chocolate powder. Wow!

I ordered a Butternut Squash Salad and split a 10” Eggplant Pizza. The meal began with warm, crusty Italian bread featuring a luxurious, soft middle that paired nicely with the light olive oil served for dipping. The spectacular salad was served with a warm rim of butternut squash that encased watercress, fennel pollen, walnuts, shaved fennel, and goat cheese. The salad was finished with truffle honey vinaigrette and balsamico – I dream about that salad still. The eggplant pizza was perfect. The thin crust was crisp to the bite yet had sufficient chew to satisfy. The eggplant was thinly sliced, dipped in an egg wash, dredged lightly with flour, sautéed and then placed on the pizza to bake with mozzarella, pecorino romano, parmigiano reggiano, oregano and a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil. Perfetto!

Not able to get the food off my mind, I revisited La Tela one more time in the four days I was on holiday. For this visit, I again ordered the Butternut Squash Salad and split a Mushroom Ragout Pizza. The rich, woodsy, delicious mushrooms were center stage with supporting elements of pecorino romano, arugula, and white truffle oil. Superb.

La Tela means canvas. Years ago, young Frank displayed extraordinary interest in food. One evening, in his father's restaurant, he requested a plate for the dessert he was preparing. Ed handed the aspiring gastronomist a plate while saying, "Here, this is your canvas." That comment later inspired Frank to develop a business plan in his senior year at the CIA in Hyde Park, New York – the very same plan that was pitched a year later to the Rinaldi's landlord at Freshfields Village. La Tela opened on November 14, 2009 and is already expanding! The current seating capacity in the restaurant is 46, the bar seats 14, and the patio can accommodate 28. The addition includes a 16 foot bar that will allow an expansion of the current beer and wine service to full liquor.

I will go back. I regret I did not have time to return to La Tela more than once during my stay. I want to try a pasta dish...and the cannoli. I will have late morning espresso with cantucci (biscotti)...and order calamari with a glass of wine while the sun is setting. I look forward to sampling the new items on the canvas. Perhaps I will have the pleasure of seeing you there.

La Tela is open 7 days a week from 11 am to 10 pm and is located at 133 Village Green Lane, Johns Island, South Carolina. Their phone number is 843-768-1951. Their website is www.latelapizzeria.com and I recommend you study the menu before you go so that you can get a head start on deciding what you will order.