

COUNTER INTELLIGENCE: AMERICAN

Mountain eatery with a touch of soul

Café Aroma in Idyllwild invites travelers to settle in for a warm meal among neighbors.

By Susan LaTempa, Times Staff Writer

Back in the day (and it was a long time ago) when Southern Californians took Sunday pleasure drives, there were cherished restaurants in places such as Laguna Beach and Lake Arrowhead that were a great excuse for an excursion. Café Aroma in Idyllwild is a throwback to that tradition — beckoning day-trippers and weekenders who wend their way up the mountain from Riverside or Palm Springs. But unlike those bygone landmarks which attracted mainly dressed-up crowds for weekend brunch and upper-crust business folk for weeknight dinners, Aroma is casual, laid-back and welcoming to all comers.

It's just the place you want to step into after that scenic drive and a brisk hike in the surrounding forest. It's where you want to head for breakfast with the kids if you've rented a cabin. And if you're holed up for the season working on your novel, it's where you want to come to re-connect with civilization.

Warm and cozy in a mountain-cottage way, Aroma bustles with locals as well as visitors. A menu of inventive versions of Italian standards is supported by all the right details: live jazz, good coffee and a rotating roster of featured wines.

Manager and "conceptualist" (as he describes himself on the café website) Frank Ferro is nearly always present, warmly greeting new arrivals, hanging out at a regular's table or bursting into song as the background music changes ("I sang that at my dad's wedding!").

Even in the winter, if the sun's out and the temperature merely brisk, lunch and brunch diners keep their jackets and vests on and sit outside on the deck. Pine and spruce trees surround the restaurant; Strawberry Creek is across the street. Aroma's on a main road, but it's a mile or so away from the central crossroads, in an area of homes, small businesses and cabin rentals.

With an attitude that's unusual in Southern California mountain eateries, Café Aroma doesn't treat its clientele as if it's captive and will just have to put up with whatever coffee-shop quality ingredients are cheapest to truck up the hill. Instead, it incorporates lovable yuppie-genteel details (hot tea in tall glasses, changing daily omelet special) as if it's competing with West Hollywood or Laguna Beach. And although there are plenty of mountain-guy choices on the menu (a "rib-eye pizza" special, for example, or skirt steak with a spaghetti side) the food's not designed just for calorie-loading cross-country skiers.

At lunch and dinner, garlic bisque is the most popular starter, and it's a warm and filling dish: creamy but not tooth-coating. Served with a salad and bread, it also forms the peasant lunch. There's raw chopped garlic in a little dish of olive oil that comes with the bread basket too, and the bread itself (rosemary-olive and *ciabatta*) is of unusual quality for such a far-flung place; frozen loaves are brought in from a top Northern California bakery and finished here. A good touch. And the scones are house-made, as is tiramisu among the desserts.

Polenta pie, another starter, is a delicious brick of polenta studded with green peppers, onion, dried tomatoes and Kalamata olives with a soupçon of spicy marinara and a whole roasted garlic on the side. Slipping a sweet roasted clove of garlic out of its papery skin to enjoy with each grainy bite makes for a dandy lunch entree. Salads — abundant greens, lightly dressed with various combinations of shrimp, chicken and salmon — are satisfyingly fresh.

The standout sandwich is the "grill and chill," a roasted apple-prosciutto sandwich with a light, cheese-crust exterior and a melting interior of warm prosciutto and a little cheese spiked with crisp-tender slices of apples from nearby Oak Glen orchards.

At dinner, the crisp-crust pizzas and the rich pastas take center stage. "Double-porto" ravioli is a knockout on a cold night — light ricotta-mushroom filled ravioli served with meaty chunks of wine-marinated portobellos simply dressed with parsley and olive oil. But there are plenty of specials — one night a pumpkin-curry soup, another night lobster ravioli — to entertain regulars.

The six-stool wine bar can be a chummy spot. One night, I overhear a woman urging another to select a South African Chardonnay from the Lazy Susan of featured wines (a half dozen or so open bottles on a spinning tray, allowing inspection and selection). "Do you work here?" the other woman wants to know. "No, but I've tried them all!" the first confides.

A snug welcome

The chess club meets here, ceramics and paintings by local artists are displayed and there's music almost every day. On one visit, we stumble into a day-long party for local luminary Herb Jeffries, 94-year-old original lead singer with the Duke Ellington Orchestra and star as the "Bronze Buckaroo" of a 1930s series of musical westerns. Aroma has named a room for Jeffries, where he holds court on this day. And although we are first-timers on a very busy night, we and other Idyllwild visitors are shoe-horned in without reservations.

On a winter weekend, we hurry in from the cold morning air — no snow, but the restaurant steps are salted against the ice — to an oasis of coffee-scented warmth. Breakfasters sip every kind of espresso drink or wrap their hands around tall mugs of organic coffee. Kids color in game books while their parents read newspapers. Those scones — maple-ginger on this day — are light and crumbly. The oatmeal is steel-cut, rich with chopped apple, walnuts and raisins and offered with steamed milk. The daily omelet is crab, onion and spinach, a festive combination, perfectly cooked and offered with "mash browns," breakfast potatoes that are like a cross between *rösti* and hash browns. It's a breakfast with a personal touch, a breakfast to energize and fuel a day outdoors — if we can tear ourselves away before lunchtime.

