



Executive chef Jason Paluska leaves San Fran to help make Funk Zone eatery an overnight success

SECTION D
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The Lark's sophisticated yet casual aesthetic projects a chic, urban styling, offering a combination of indoor and outdoor seating for 130.

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Just like its namesake, The Lark was determined to make an impression on Santa Barbara when it opened its doors.

Named in honor of the sleek Pullman overnight train that serviced the Santa Barbara area between 1910 and 1968, the stylish eatery in the Funk Zone opened in the historic Santa Barbara Fish Market building last August and quickly made a name for itself on the local culinary scene.

While The Lark's sophisticated yet casual aesthetic, which projects a chic urban styling drawn from the use of vintage and repurposed materials, inspires patrons to relax and linger, it is the restaurant's menu that has been giving diners cause to return.

By dividing it into categories such as "From the Farm," "From the Forest" and "From the Sea," executive chef Jason Paluska has taken an artisan approach to The Lark's seasonally and locally inspired menu.

He is also big on sharing, so you will want to visit with friends as there are plenty of dishes worth trying.

Snacks include Crispy Brussels Sprouts, with medjool dates, garam, sesame and lime, and Deviled Eggs made with crispy pancetta, jalapeno, smoked paprika and chive. Mains such as Grilled Apple Glazed Pork Belly Sliders and Citrus Cured Skuna Bay Salmon are just some of the regionally inspired foods. And for dessert, there's the Pot de Creme, a lightly whipped chocolate with a smoked almond brittle and chestnut cream. The drinks, including



Jason Paluska, executive chef of The Lark, holding one of his favorite appetizers, Herb Crusted Bone Marrow, says the Funk Zone restaurant's success is the result of its solid preparation, both in establishing the business and the menu.



Happily settled in San Francisco, Mr. Paluska didn't initially envision himself helming the kitchen at The Lark, but all that was about to change.

Born and raised in Houston, Texas, Mr. Paluska's introduction to California came after graduating from the University of Houston with a degree in hotel and restaurant management in 2004. His decision to enroll at the university's College of Hotel and Restaurant Management was the result of working in service at several Houston restaurants while attending high school. As part of his degree, Mr. Paluska was introduced to cooking. At one point, he took a coastal road trip from Los Angeles to San Francisco — he'd always heard about California and wanted to see it for himself — and was quickly drawn to the lifestyle, so much so that he realized The Golden State was where his future lies. Upon his return to Texas, he started investigating culinary schools in California.

"I looked at a culinary school in San Diego and went out there in 2005 and the place was full of chain restaurants," Mr. Paluska said. "It didn't seem very culinary driven. And then I remembered how great the food scene was in San Francisco and how much I enjoyed my time there. So I applied to a culinary school that I could afford, got a call back saying I was accepted, and then moved there in January 2006."

Excited at the prospect of beginning a new chapter of his professional life, Mr. Paluska threw himself into an intense six-month professional culinary program at North Beach's Tante Marie's Cooking School, all the while exploring the food the city had offer.

"As it turned out, I didn't realize just how great San Francisco really was," Mr. Paluska admitted. "The city itself was as much an education as culinary school was. Once I started going out to the restaurants where the locals ate,

LARK

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the Blood and Smoke — featuring mezeal and local blood oranges — even get the farm-to-bar treatment.

The Lark, which serves dinner Tuesday through Sunday (brunch is coming soon!), is co-owned by Sherry Villanueva and Dan Russo and was designed by Doug Washington, co-owner of famed San Francisco eateries Town Hall and Salt House. Mr. Paluska had worked with both Mr. Russo and Mr. Washington while in San Francisco, where he was based when The Lark started to take shape early last year.

"I heard that something really cool was happening in Santa Barbara," Mr. Paluska told the News-Press during a recent visit to the restaurant. Little did he know at the time how close to the major players he really was.

"Then I got a call from Sherry Villanueva, who asked me to come down and check it out ... I then found out that there were two other people (Mr. Russo and Mr. Washington) working on the project who I worked with in San Francisco that I had a ton of respect for."

I started understanding food in a totally different way. The food was incredible and so inspiring. I became a culinary sponge and soaked up as much as I could."

After graduating from the culinary school in 2006, Mr. Paluska accepted an externship at San Francisco's famed Town Hall, a regionally inspired restaurant with a southern flair. While there, he worked under chef and co-owner Mitchell Rosenthal, who quickly set the professional bar for his young protégé.

"He was a really cool and down-to-earth guy," Mr. Paluska recalled. "I was blown away that this guy could have this super successful and super popular restaurant, make this super tasty food, and be such a cool person. He rode a skateboard from restaurant to restaurant."

Mr. Rosenthal, who owns Town Hall with his brother, Steven, and Mr. Washington, was in the process of establishing a nouveau American restaurant with his two partners called Salt House. When the trio started contemplating the staffing of their new business, Mr. Paluska was invited to come on board.

"I was chosen to go across and help open the restaurant," Mr. Paluska said. "There, I was a part of opening a new restaurant in San Francisco from the ground up! It was a crazy, surreal environment. I had been there three and a half weeks and I was signing a filming waiver to be on the Food Network." (The network

at the helm.

"A lot of things were already in place by the time I signed on," Mr. Paluska said. "But when I got down here in April last year, we really fleshed things out. We spent April through June planning, and that really paid off when we opened."

So did hiring Mr. Paluska. "Knowing Jason from RN74, I saw how he was respected by all the other chefs in the kitchen," said Lark co-owner Mr. Russo. "He had a side that held people accountable, but also a side that made people love to work for him. I saw that he was ready to take the next step to have his own kitchen and be an executive chef."

The Lark's layout lends itself perfectly to social dining. The centerpiece of Mr. Washington's design is a long communal dining table where guests can mingle while dining. The rustic-looking wooden tables and booths that constitute the rest of the eatery are large enough to be comfortable but not too large that they prevent reaching across and stealing a sample from a friend or partner's plate.

Santa Barbara area produce has been a huge influence on Mr.

was doing a story on the opening of Salt House.)

Starting in October 2006, Mr. Paluska worked in the kitchen at Salt House under executive chef Robert Leva for three years. While Mr. Paluska was quick to admit the intensity of the experience, he also attributed much of his development as a chef to working under Mr. Leva.

"And it's not just me who feels that way," Mr. Paluska said. "There were four or five guys working on the line there and he invested in all of us. We have all gone on to do greater things because of working in that kitchen. I feel so grateful to chef Robert because he got me to a level where I could play the game with all the heavy hitters in San Francisco."

Play the game he did. After working at Salt House, Mr. Paluska then moved on to help open Michael Mina's RN74, where he first met general manager Mr. Russo and spent four years as sous chef prior to accepting the position of executive chef at The Lark.

"It took a lot to get me to leave San Francisco," Mr. Paluska admitted. "It ultimately came down to the challenge of doing something of this caliber. It was an incredible opportunity for me to express myself as a chef."

After relocating to Santa Barbara, Mr. Paluska found himself part of opening a new restaurant for the third time in his life. Only this time around, he was

Paluska in pulling together those plates, as has local meats and seafood. But the foundations of The Lark's menu came from Mr. Paluska simply asking himself what he would like to eat. He then devised dishes using what was locally and seasonally available — ingredients that are complex enough to spark a customer's interest but not overthought.

He cites his Herb Crusted Bone Marrow as a prime example of that. The aromatic bone marrow is served intact with a sweet and spicy jam and buttermilk thyme biscuits, putting an unusual ingredient in a familiar setting. Another dish Mr. Paluska says is a must-try is the Marinated & Grilled Hanger Steak, which he tenderizes in a herbaceous marinade for three days and serves with charred local broccoli and a Calabrian chili vinaigrette.

"I want someone to be able to look at one of my dishes and know what it is," Mr. Paluska said. "The Lark is meant to be well thought out, but it's also meant to be approachable. And you just need to sit down and eat here to see that we've achieved that."

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ALEPPO THYME BUTTERMILK BISCUITS

1 cup all-purpose flour
1 1/4 teaspoons baking soda
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
2 1/2 teaspoons sugar
1 1/4 teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon chili flakes

1 teaspoon black pepper
1 tablespoon fresh thyme, chopped
2/3 cup butter
1/2 cup buttermilk

Combine dry ingredients and add thyme. Cut in a quarter of the butter to achieve gravel-like consistency. Add remaining butter and cut to pea size. Add buttermilk and mix until almost combined, do not overmix. Turn mixture out onto lined full sheet pan. Press mixture out to 1 1/2 inches thick. Chill until cold enough to cut with round, 2-inch-diameter cookie cutter. Re-press trim and cut again. Place on cookie sheet and bake in preheated 350-degree oven and cook until lightly browned, about 10 minutes. Serve with Pickled Pepper and Persimmon Jam.

Yield: 6 biscuits
Source: Jason Paluska, executive chef of The Lark in Santa Barbara

Brunch is coming soon!