

# The New York Times N.Y. / Region

CONNECTICUT DINING | GOURMET TO GO



All of the Flavor With Little of the

Effort

Judith Pszenica for The New York Times

Chocolate and raspberry mousse tartlets at the Pantry, in Fairfield.

By CHRISTOPHER BROOKS

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THE greater part of the holiday season is still ahead, but entertaining can be simplified, and kitchen time reduced, through the use of in-store prepared foods – if not on the actual holiday, then during those hectic days preceding it. The three shops that follow are representative of the kinds of efforts being made by independent grocery stores around Connecticut

The Pantry in Fairfield, CT is co-owned by Andrew Rolleri & Thierry LeMeur

The breads sold by [the Pantry](#) are made by various bakeries, and its cheeses, crackers and other staples come from elsewhere, too. But nearly all the rest – more than enough to supply any party or holiday gathering – is prepared in-house by the grocery's team of four chefs. Each of those chefs graduated from the Culinary Institute of America, including Andy Rolleri, a co-owner, who is responsible for the pastries. Their collective expertise is reflected in dishes that would be quite at home in a high-end restaurant.

Attention to detail is evident in nearly everything. That includes the crispy coconut-panko chicken breasts; finely seared, herb-dusted salmon fillets; and grilled (medium-rare) flank steak, marinated in soy sauce and ginger (\$13 to \$15.50 a pound). Even chicken pot - pie, one of the Pantry's more popular entrees, receives a fresh twist with a biscuit crust, rather than the usual pie dough (\$16).

Of the seven or so soups (\$4.75 a pint), Tuscan white bean and spinach is particularly notable. A quinoa mix (with spinach, tomato and feta) headlines a group of about 10 prepared salads (\$4.25 to \$11 a pound), which are offered in addition to a salad bar with house-made dressings (\$6.25 a pound). "We toss the greens ourselves," Mr. LeMeur said. "Nobody else touches them." The bakery section features coffee cake (\$9), cheese-almond Danish, various scones and pains au chocolat (\$1.75 each), as well as an abundance of cookies, cakes, tarts, brownies and éclairs. But don't let the sweets lure you too far from the dizzying array of main dishes ( Various Pricing ) in the cooler case. After surveying the take-out options – Pan Seared Pork Chops w/Sambal Sauce, spanakopita, scallops wrapped in bacon, tartlets of lobster, crab and leek, and chorizo and onion empañadas, to name just a few – you may be tempted to give up cooking altogether.

The Pantry, 1580 Post Road (Route 1), Fairfield; (203) 259-0400 or thepantry .net.

WEEKLY  
★ BEST ★  
OF  
FAIRFIELD COUNTY  
READERS' POLL  
2011

# Fairfield County

Best of Fairfield County 2011 winners



Andrew Rolleri and Thierry Le Meur from The Pantry

1st **DESSERTS** (First Place) 2004-2005-2006-2007-2008-2009-2010-2011-2012

The Pantry has all kinds of fancy desserts. We loved the sound of the Mocha Java Torte – a chocolate cake filled with coffee-and-Kahlua-flavored ganache (a mix of chocolate and cream) and glazed with chocolate – when co-owner Andy Rolleri described it to us. But it's the simple stuff that makes up the bakery/gourmet grocery's ... well ... bread and butter. "We probably sell more cookies than anything else," says Rolleri. Each week, about 3,500 of them go out the door. The store offers a dozen standards (the most popular being chocolate chip) and rotates in several special varieties. The Pantry also sells frozen dough so customers can bake its most popular cookies at home. "The apple babka is [also] very popular," he says. His wife's favorite dessert is the panna cotta made with coconut milk and topped with fresh berries. 1580 Post Rd. Fairfield (203) 259-0400

1st) The Pantry **Prepared Foods** (First Place) 2009-2010-2011-2012

The Pantry's customers have discerning palates, so they appreciate that the gourmet food shop uses top-quality ingredients in its prepared foods. "It's not the least-expensive way for us, but it shows in the end," says Andy Rolleri, co-owner, "and we keep our prices reasonable." He credits "the great people in our kitchen" — especially Kirsten Guldbrandsen, who has been chef from day one of The Pantry's eight-year life. Some of the most popular dishes, which come in individual and family-size portions, are the chicken pot pie, shepherd's pie and Moroccan chicken. "There isn't a lot that isn't popular," Rolleri says, including dips and pestos. This year the store installed a rotisserie. "People like the convenience factor," says Rolleri, "being able to grab something in a pinch, have dinner ready on arrival at home and not have to clean up."

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1st) The Pantry Salad Bar (First Place) 2009-2010-2011

Salads are super-fresh and never boring at The Pantry. Customers choose from a seemingly infinite variety of greens and toppings, and the salad is assembled for them (no messy, self-serve salad bar here). Romaine is supplemented by red and green leaf lettuce and radicchio. Meat options include high-quality Freebird chicken, roasted salmon, shrimp and steak. Vegetable proteins are beans, chickpeas, nuts and sunflower seeds. The only thing customers won't find is tofu. "It doesn't really go," says Andy Rolleri, co-owner of the eight-year-old gourmet food store. Dressings are house-made, as are the croutons. The Pantry also has eight varieties of pre-packaged salad. (The most popular include spinach and goat cheese and Chinese chicken.)

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1st) Specialty Foods/Gourmet Shop (First Place) 2009-2010-2011-2012

"We try to find things regular grocery stores don't have," says Theirry Le Meur, co-owner of The Pantry. To this end, the Fairfield store has stocked ethnic food supplies, like Asian fish sauce and rice paper for making summer rolls, and widened its selections of jams, sauces, marinades and baking essentials. Customers often want local products, and The Pantry meets that demand with Andrew's Honey, Kerry Woods Salad Dressing, Blue Strawberry Granola, Trinity Farm Yogurt and lettuce from Two Guys from Woodbridge (which "flies off the shelf," Le Meur says). The Pantry's meat offerings are also exhaustive. "We can pretty much get anything — duck, rabbit — with some notice," Le Meur says. Butchers will cut meat to order, and there is also a case of pre-packaged meat. And the store offers organic salmon from the Shetland Islands. "The Pantry is an evolving business," says Le Meur. "We never stay the same."

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# CTbites

Your guide to great food in Fairfield County

I happened upon this cold weather remedy while browsing the aisles of Fairfield's [The Pantry](#) (yes, I do this for fun). Always eager to find a more perfect solution to the post snowball fight chill, (and also bit of chocolate addict), I have sampled a lot of hot cocoa in my day. I quickly realized that "The Pantry's" Chocolat Chaud is not to be wasted on the little ones.



At the very least, have a sip before you pass the warm steaming cup over, or heck, just make yourself a mug. This decadent rich treat is made with Valrhona Cocoa from France, and sugar...that's all. It is perfect in its simplicity, and lacking all those strange ingredients you can't pronounce. This little brown bag is exactly what you want in your pantry for the holidays. The instructions on the bag tell you to mix 8 oz of milk along with 1/4 cup of hot chocolate mix, and then simmer to about 170 degrees. If you have an espresso machine, we preferred the results from the steaming wand. Either way, the cocoa integrates better into the liquid after the milk has been heated up a little. This will prevent those nasty clumps. Drink it neat or topped with a little whipped cream. Enjoy!

[The Pantry](#) 1580 Post Rd, Fairfield. 203.259.0400