

The Pantry: A gourmet haven in Fairfield

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FAIRFIELD -- A passion for food made The Pantry in Fairfield a reality, but -- along with quality fare -- it's been the honest input from loyal customers that's helped make it an ongoing success.

"We have a lot of the same customers all the time," said co-owner Andy Rolleri, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America. "We have people who come in three times a day."

"The clientele seems to take ownership in the store," said Paul Zawadski, general manager.

"We have people that tell us when they like something and when they don't like something ... (and) we have people that provide us very structured feedback on dishes that we do and items that we offer."

Despite occupying a comparatively small space, The Pantry combines an upscale market with a small deli, an attended salad bar that starts serving breakfast at 7 a.m., and a bountiful bakery that's overseen by Rolleri, who is also the pastry chef. Selections of prepared food are available throughout the store -- everything from frozen pizza, crab and leek tartlets, and panko-crust chicken cutlets, to gluten-free brownies and homemade ice cream.

"It's 90 percent of what I need in one place," said Dawn Kreitler of Fairfield, who's visited The Pantry twice a week since it opened in 2003.

"It's fantastic," echoed Caren Nelson, a regular since its inception. "They have great product. They cater all our parties. It's fresh, reliable, friendly, and the best bakery ever."

"I think all of us in the store care about food and ... about the quality of the food," said co-owner Thierry LeMeur, a native of France. "We try to use the best ingredients that we can find ... The cookies, pastries, the prepared food -- everything is what I would make for myself. It's just caring about food."

LeMeur, who for almost 20 years was the buyer for Mercurio's market in downtown

Fairfield until it closed, attributes the bulk of The Pantry's success to having three Institute-trained chefs working the kitchen, including Rolleri, Dan Monroe, and Kirsten Gulbrandsen, who began with the store and is about to become a partner.

"A chef is somebody who can take food and bring it to a higher level," he said. "They can create ... They know food chemistry. They read a lot and they test a lot."

Both Rolleri and LeMeur were born to the world of food. Rolleri's family owned the Ocean Sea Grill in Bridgeport, which for decades was a popular spot.

And, being French, LeMeur grew up with cuisine that many consider to be the gold standard of gourmet cooking. "My mother was a great cook.. "She turned me on to foods that were unusual--sweetbreads, pigs feet, lamb tongues, everything. I come from an area of France (Brittany) where everything that is off an animal is edible."

For more information, visit www.thepantry.net/

The Pantry is located at 1580 Post Road, Fairfield, CT 06824 (203) 259-0400

Directions are available on our website