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Taste^{of}theTown

By Angela Pettera Photographs by Gary Moss

SAFIRE LIGHTS UP CAMARILLO

New eatery brings another upscale nightlife option to this quiet town.

SAFIRE DOESN'T LOOK LIKE MUCH FROM THE OUTSIDE, but restaurants built into strip malls or sprawling plazas seldom do. This is Camarillo after all, not a flashy city with tons of nightlife options. But inside Safire, it's a different story.

The Joel Clemons Trio plays upbeat jazz near the front door Wednesday through Saturday nights. Just beyond them sits a bustling bar with stools and high pub tables. Next to the bar is a glass-enclosed wine cellar that also holds a table for eight. The main dining area is decorated in dark woods and burgundy print fabrics. Those deep colors act as a backdrop to the long, dazzling, open kitchen that runs the length of the room. Eddy Bitton of Bitton Design Group in Agoura Hills lit and decorated that kitchen as if it were a stage. Diners tucked into one of the booths facing the action can watch as line cooks sauté and sauce all night. At the end of the kitchen closest to the bar, a cook slides bubbling pies out of the fire-breathing mouth of a 6,000-pound wood-burning pizza oven stocked with either oak or fruitwood. All along the front of this elongated hot line, servers sidle up to the beige-and-black-streaked granite counter to collect their orders. It's one long hive of activity and fun to watch.

Michael Muirhead, the executive chef and co-owner (with his uncle Jim Foley) is a new breed of chef: one who runs his kitchen

with quiet authority rather than cursing and throwing equipment. He didn't come through the volatile crucible of a French apprenticeship; instead he began his career at 17, shucking oysters at Jim Foley's California Grill (also in Camarillo). Then he worked for Norbert Schulz in Santa Barbara—"my first real mentor," says Muirhead. From there he explored Italian cuisine in Florence and Naples, and French pastry-making in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Eventually he ended up as Lee Hefter's sous chef at Spago in Beverly Hills. After three years in that position, Muirhead was ready to accept his uncle's offer of opening a restaurant created just for him.

Safire took about five years from conception to completion due to various delays connected with the sale of Pardee Plaza, now called Mission Oaks Plaza. But Muirhead feels the community has grown up around him during the delay. They've certainly turned out for Safire. The large restaurant—with its main dining room, bar area, patio seating, raised-platform semiprivate room, and wine-cellar room—seats more than 300. On a recent night, it was almost full of groups of friends enjoying dinner, drinks, and each others' company.

Muirhead's regional American menu draws heavily on local produce, so expect to see plenty of seasonal ingredients like soft-shell crab, heirloom tomatoes, asparagus, and peas. Carpaccio of filet mignon (\$13) is





ruby red, drizzled with a deep yellow lemon-caper vinaigrette, and capped with a thatch of shaved fennel, radish, baby arugula, and Parmigiano-Reggiano. Hamachi sashimi (\$13) is mixed with serrano chiles, scallions, and a ginger-ponzu sauce. Sautéed white Gulf shrimp (\$14) are plump and juicy, swimming in a pinot grigio and mustard sauce. Luckily they come with crostini to soak up the lightly creamy liquid. It would be easy to make a meal of the starters alone, but the entrées are just as beguiling.

New Bedford sea scallops (\$26) are sauced with a spicy (but not unbearably hot) red Thai curry. A whole Tuscan *branzino* gets fired in the wood-burning pizza oven (which also turns out nice thin-crust pizzas topped with interesting ingredients like fontina cheese, shallots, or arugula). A double-cut pork chop (\$27) is accompanied by a green apple-horseradish slaw.

Desserts (\$8) are definitely worth trying. The chocolate pot de crème cake is wonderfully bittersweet with a texture similar to a creamy chilled ganache. The lemon curd tart is well served by a scoop of mascarpone gelato: refreshing, different, and much-appreciated, just like all of Safire. ■

Safire serves lunch and dinner daily. It's located just off Hwy. 101 at 4850 Santa Rosa Road in Camarillo. Call 805-389-1227 for reservations.

Executive chef and co-owner Michael Muirhead (left) dreams up delicious dishes like pan-roasted Alaskan halibut with heirloom tomato water, Mediterranean olives, heirloom cherry tomatoes, garlic confit, roasted fingerling potatoes, and micro basil (opposite page).