

## Best of the East Bay - Food

### Best steak house, milk shake, Thai food, farm stand, brisket sandwich...

New Restaurant And Mexican Restaurant

#### *Reader Pick*

Watching Rodney Worth work the dining room of The Peasant & The Pear in his chef's whites, it's clear why he has earned such a loyal following. Worth smiles as he shakes hands with diners, calling them by name and asking how their braised lamb shank or wild Pacific salmon tastes.

"We listen to our customers," says Worth, a hardy 34-year-old with a head of thick brown hair and an infectious smile, who moved his restaurant into the Danville Clock Tower Center in February. "We'll give you what you want. People come back because they feel at home here."

Restaurants are notoriously risky businesses, but so far Worth is like a spelling bee champion in a game of Scrabble. After graduating with a culinary degree from Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill and stints at Livermore's Wente Vineyards Restaurant and San Francisco's now-shuttered Bizou, Worth opened The Peasant & The Pear next to a dry cleaner in a strip mall in San Ramon in 2004. "Everyone told us not to open there," recalls Worth. "They said it was a horrible location."

The Peasant & The Pear began as a breakfast and lunch spot, with a few off-site catering gigs on the side. Whatever the space lacked in atmosphere, Worth made up for with his delicious, Italian- and French-inspired cooking. His rustic food and warm dining room presence started a word-of-mouth wildfire, and soon demand required the chef to start serving dinner. It took only a year and a half for the restaurant to outgrow its 34-seat space. "The last year was crazy. We were getting really popular, and people were sitting in the parking lot in their cars waiting for tables at night," says Worth. He knew it was time to expand.

In February, The Peasant & The Pear moved to its current location, the former site of La Salamandre and Louka. Judging by the Saturday night crowd, you'd never guess the restaurant was the new kid on the block in a town packed with well-established white-tablecloth restaurants, including Bridges, Piatti Locali, Faz, Patrick David's, and Amber.

Worth has made the new space his own with subtle changes. He has lightened the rooms by removing the curtains that used to cover the windows in the main dining room and

shifting the color palette from heavy rust to sunflower yellow and dusky blue. Otherwise, the restaurant looks much the same, down to the zinc bar from France.

Diners without reservations quickly become familiar with the bar as they wait for a table. There, they nurse house-made cocktails such as the pear-tini or a sweet vermouth-kissed Walt-tini, named for regular Walt DeHope.

The drinks are edgier than Worth's cooking, which consists of well-prepared classics. Artichokes, pared down to their tender cores then battered and deep fried, beg to be dunked into a demitasse of Meyer lemon aioli. Chèvre chaud with toast points is another familiar, delicious appetizer, but Worth gives his a twist, accenting the tangy goat cheese with a bit of slightly spicy tomato sauce.

Pizzas here are an easy sell, and Worth's pies have quite a fan base. Crusts are doughy and the toppings copious, but it's hard to quibble when he tops one pie with sweet pear, Gorgonzola, and caramelized onions.

Worth approaches main courses with similar zeal. He's not afraid to amplify the flavors of basic starches, adding provolone to the smooth polenta under a Chianti-braised lamb shank or spiking mashed potatoes with manchego to accompany steak au poivre, which on our visit was, unfortunately, too heavily peppered.

Worth's pastry chef, Gunilla Andersson, has also won over locals. Her pear tart is so popular, guests insist that it stay on the menu. Andersson is a native of Sweden and puts a Scandinavian spin on bananas Foster, adding a dome of pound cake to the traditional caramelized bananas over vanilla ice cream.

Even though Worth moved into his new space just four months ago, he already has big plans for the future. He's considering opening a pizzeria in the neighborhood or a second bistro as far away as St. Helena. He'd better be careful though. Each of his openings seems to be accompanied by the birth of another child: He and his wife, Natalie, had their first child, Zachary, right before opening in San Ramon and their second, Zoe, right before opening in Danville. Anyhow, for now, he's focused on his customers at the Danville Clock Tower Peasant & The Pear.

"We're not really in the restaurant industry, we're in the hospitality industry," says Worth of his approach to the business. "People should walk out the door satisfied and happy. If they don't, we've failed."

Contact: 267 Hartz Ave., Danville, (925) 820-6611, [www.thepeasantandthepear.com](http://www.thepeasantandthepear.com)

Hours: Lunch and dinner Tues.–Sat.

Price: Appetizers \$7–\$10, entrées \$14–\$29

Alcohol: Full bar

### **at a glance**

**What Makes It Special:** Worth makes an honest attempt to greet every customer. He says he wants to please each one.

**The Space:** During the summer months, the outdoor seating areas are prime territory. The patio in back is removed from the hustle of the dining room, and the tables in front are the place to see and be seen.

**When to Go:** Lunch is when the restaurant really shines, from the smart sandwiches and salads to the light streaming in through the dining room windows.

**What to Order:** At lunch, scrumptious sandwiches such as the Danville cheese steak and the Tuscan, sliced chicken breast and sun-dried tomatoes on rosemary bread. If you go at dinnertime, don't miss the special martinis and goat cheese appetizer.

**Bonus:** The kitchen doesn't scrimp on the good stuff in salads. Toppings such as niçoise olives, bacon bits, and candied walnuts are scattered with a generous hand.

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