

# Casual French cafe graces Laurel Village

It was a perfect pastry that led to Rigolo's opening — one lovely croissant, not too big, not too soft, but just crisp, buttery and right.

Douglas Mathieux had stopped at Pascal Rigo's La Boulange de Polk, the small French-style bakery on Polk Street, and was amazed that this little crescent tasted just like the ones

**Dining Out**  
Amanda Berne

he remembered eating for breakfast as a little boy in France. Mathieux's passion for that croissant led him to Rigo, and a plan for Rigolo, the French bakery and cafe in Laurel Village, which he co-owns.

Despite Rigolo's urban setting, it aims for a French country feel, with lofty ceilings, light wood accents and big, homey flower displays near the front. A play area for kids, complete with a miniature table, sits in the rear of the store.

## Simply French

The French cafe food matches the feel of the place. A selection of fresh-baked breads and pastries rests prominently in a case up front. There's nothing froufrou about the cooked dishes, either — they're straightforward and simply prepared.

Rigo created the menu with Rigolo chef Jeff Gambardella, using local purveyors' products where possible. Lunch and dinner feature a nice list of sandwiches, soups, salads and pizzas, all under \$10. The dinner menu also has specials, which are slightly more expensive and rotate every so often, but on each of my three visits always included the popular roasted chicken.

With Rigolo, Laurel Village locals get a pleasant place to get an easy and casual meal. What they don't get, though, is consistent service. It feels confusing — sometimes Rigolo pretends to be a restaurant, and other times it seems to be the cafe that it is.

True to cafe style, patrons order and pay at the counter, get a number, help themselves to silverware, water and condiments, take a seat and wait for the food to be brought to the table.

## Wine pairings

While ordering, take note of the numbers next to the menu items. They correlate to a wine that pairs with the dish — and if you like the glass of wine you choose, the bottles are available for purchase from neighboring Wine Impression.

On the first visit, the cashier offered to bring the meal in courses, and that paid off in a good meal. The frisee salad (\$6.95) was especially good, balancing the bitterness of the spidery frise with the sweetness of grapes and apples and the crunch of roasted walnuts. Blue cheese dresses up the salad and melts into the light vinaigrette, softly coating each leaf.



DAVID PAUL MORRIS / San Francisco Chronicle

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Just when the salad was gone, the salmon (\$13.95), one of the specials, arrived, along with the chorizo and fig pizza (\$8.95). The salmon was nicely cooked, with a little dish of lemony buerre blanc on the side; the accompanying mashed potatoes punched up the comfort factor.

Rigolo's "baker's pizzas" are a different breed than most. The dough — flaky and pastry-like — is rolled into a long rectangle and topped with some interesting combinations. Fontina and sauteed fresh fennel provided the base for the chorizo and dried figs, which was fine but would be even better when fresh figs are in season.

## Cafe or restaurant?

The restaurant feel of Rigolo had settled in by the time we started thinking about dessert. Since we hadn't ordered it at the outset, we had to make a trip back to the counter and a start a whole new transaction. That's when the cafe feel kicked back in; the disconnect was irritating. Still, I left satisfied and impressed — until subsequent visits.

It's not that the food was bad. On the contrary, the roasted chicken (\$13.95) boasted an impossibly crisp golden skin with a lovely herbal quality. Instead of the usual monstrous half of a chicken, the chef selected smaller birds. The daintier halves are just the right size. The mac-n-cheese side dish was creamy and pungent, but needed salt.

It was the service that was off. All of our dishes, including the French onion soup (\$4.95) and Caesar salad (\$6.95), were crowded together on the table. Unlike the first visit, when dishes were cleared promptly, this time they were left to pile up. Had we known this was how we'd be served, we would have gone to the trouble of placing separate orders for each course to pace the meal.

Instead, two bites into the soup, we were more concerned with diving into the seared sirloin (\$13.95), lest it get cold. No matter, though,

## Rigolo

3465 California St. (near Laurel), San Francisco; (415) 876-7777  
Open 8 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Saturday, until 8 p.m. Sunday. Beer and wine. No reservations. Credit cards accepted. Free parking lot in back.

<b>Overall</b>	★★	Atmosphere	★★
Food	★★	Prices	\$\$
Service	★	Noise Rating	🔊🔊

**Pluses:** Nice salads, especially the frisee with blue cheese. Unique and flaky pizza crusts can be very good.

**Minuses:** The style of service is confusing, and service itself can be brusque.

## RATINGS KEY

★★★★ Extraordinary    ★★★ Excellent    ★★ Good    ★ Fair    □ Poor

(\$)	Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under	(\$\$\$)	Expensive: \$18-\$24
(\$\$)	Moderate: \$11-\$17	(\$\$\$\$)	Very Expensive: more than \$25

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings.

🔊	Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels)	🔊🔊🔊	Can talk only in raised voices (75-80)
🔊🔊	Can talk easily (65-70)	🔊🔊🔊🔊	Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)
🔊🔊🔊	Talking normally gets difficult (70-75)		

Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.

the soup was bland, with a cloying sweetness. The salad, which had a dressing that was more vinaigrette than creamy Caesar, was better and already cold, so there was no need to rush through it. The sirloin came with a too-sweet onion jam that didn't do much to enhance the peppery steak, but the meat was tender and very good.

The egg pizza (\$7.95), a perfect mix of ingredients, needed to be attended to quickly since it was served with everything else. That way when the egg broke, the yolk seeped ever so slightly into the light tomato sauce, creating a creamy coating for the spinach, mushrooms and pancetta. It's definitely fork-and-knife pizza; the crust sags a bit in the middle if it sits too long.

In a bakery, desserts should be the strong point, but the pear and vanilla streusel tart (\$4.95) was disappointing — too sweet, with very little vanilla flavor. The fudgy, dense chocolate gateau (\$4.95), slightly crackly on top, is a much better choice.

By my third visit — brunch — it was hard to imagine how the meal would evolve. My order was taken

brusquely and, once again, all the dishes were brought together — including the wrong pizza.

We started on the croque madame (\$6.95), but soon stopped. Instead of nicely melted cheese, cold shreds hardened around the prosciutto, as if the sandwich had been pulled out of the oven before it was done.

The wrong pizza was quickly replaced with the one we did order — smoked salmon with red onion and potato (\$9.95), a nice twist on lox and bagel. The drizzle of coarse-grained mustard sauce was a nice complement to the silky salmon and potatoes.

## No whoopie

We were dying to try the whoopie pie (\$4.95), but as on the previous visits, it wasn't available.

As a cafe, Rigolo's service, timing and ordering system need work. As a restaurant, it excels at offering some nice, comforting dishes that appeal to the neighborhood. Now it just has to decide which it wants to be.

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