

At the back end of nowhere: Los Pinos winery, restaurant thrive in remote Camp County location

Written by BY TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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When a plate leaves her kitchen, Los Pinos Executive Chef Dana Sneed says this to her staff: *Remember you're giving them a gift from our heart to theirs.*

"That's the way we look at it," Sneed said during a recent Saturday evening pre-dinner rush. This philosophy has held since the restaurant opened in 2005.

Having employees who enjoy their jobs is also critical to the operation's success.

"It's important that our staff have fun, too," chef notes. "If they're not having fun, our guests are not going to have fun, either."

Los Pinos is open on Friday and Saturdays from noon until 11 p.m. and on Sundays from noon until 6 p.m. On Friday and Saturday evenings, a jazz band provides a mellow backdrop to the casual dining atmosphere.

They do not take reservations, so it's best to come early or later, to beat the dinner rush. Chef says there have been times when as many as 50 people were waiting for a table.

"It's hard to keep it low key on a night like that," she said. "They want to be seated, of course, but at the same time, everyone appreciates the fact that when they sit down, that is their table."

Even though it's important to turn tables during a busy evening, the servers at Los Pinos won't be dropping your tab as soon as dessert is served. Chef doesn't want her guests to eat and run.

"I don't want the wait staff to be in a hurry to give the guest their bill," she explained.

"Sometimes the customers think we're not paying attention to their bill, but what we really want is for them to hang out a while. Enjoy the jazz. Watch the vines grow."



Getting to Los Pinos Winery and Restaurant is half the fun. The place is located off US Highway 271, down a farm to market road and two tiny blacktop roads. But once you're there, you'll find a 2,900 square foot patio, a 2,500 square foot dining hall and a 12,000 square foot winery that looks like it was plucked from Napa Valley and put down among the piney woods.

The hall holds about 86 inside and the patio can seat 100 comfortably. The al fresco dining, too, is delightful in the spring and fall.

Sneed and her husband, Jeff, who is the vintner, live on the property. During crush (the July and August harvest season), Sneed doesn't see much of her spouse. The winery has 12 acres of its own vines on the 40 acre-grounds, plus 45 acres of vines in the Texas High Plains.

"He got in 16 tons of grapes [from West Texas] today," chef noted. "He'll be up all night crushing those."

Since opening the tasting room in 2002, Los Pinos' business has expanded so much that they've had to purchase grapes from other Texas vineyards because they "have not been able to grow enough [grapes] to meet the demand," says Sneed.

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Before opening the restaurant at Los Pinos, Sneed, who has always loved to cook, was owner of The Mansion in the Longview/Kilgore area.

“We had 14,000 square feet on nine acres,” she said. “We did special events plus operating the restaurant. I did that for five years”

The self-taught Sneed worked at a country club prior to owning The Mansion.

Sneed says one of the keys to a successful restaurant is to keep changing the menu. She shows off a new, Italian-made pizza oven, (see photo below right) saying they'll be launching an expanded menu once the oven is installed and allowed to season for about three weeks.

Of course, Los Pinos rotates favorites like the jumbo lump crab cakes (\$21) with spicy crevette de crème sauce back to the special menu about every three weeks.

“I'm really picky about the crab,” chef explained. “I insist on having bigger lumps so that you get an actual piece of meat and not some shredded bit.”

Chef pays attention to the way her food is presented, too. The crab cakes are stacked on jasmine rice, according to the current trends, and topped with snow peas and ginger salad.

“I studied art in China, so I have an art background,” she noted. “I guess that plays into my presentations.”

Another Los Pinos favorite is Italian Cheese Toes (\$7), a delicately baked puff pastry stuffed with sun dried tomatoes, mozzarella (made on the premises) and prosciutto. The appetizer proved to be a happy accident.

“I came up with them one day when we had extra stuff,” she said with a laugh. “I wanted to be creative. Our guests loved them. We probably make 1,500 of them each week.”

One thing you won't find at Los Pinos is fried food.

“When I moved here, I sold my fryer and said, 'No more,’” she explained. “I have a tiny fryer in the back and every once in a while I'll fry a garnish of some kind, but nothing else.”



Another specialty of the house is getting a makeover. Sneed is overseeing the installation of the new Italian-made pizza oven. Once operational and seasoned for the right amount of time, Sneed will begin offering a wide variety of artisan pizzas, in addition to their already-popular Margherita (\$10) made with fresh tomatoes, sun dried tomato sauce, fresh basil and fresh mozzarella, which is made on the premises.

“I actually went to California and was certified by an Italian group who is picky about who they let use their ovens,” she said. “We're going for the really rustic style with lots of flavor instead of a lot of sauce.”

In time, Sneed hopes to make the baguettes they use for tapas platter (\$25), etc. in the oven, too.

Trice and Pat Lawrence joined us for dinner a couple of weeks ago. The guys had Sneed's special for the evening, grilled tuna, cucumber salad and snow peas (\$21). Pat and I split an order of truffle mac 'n' cheese (\$9) and a tapas platter.

Chef was most polite about Mr. Mathews' instructions for his fish.

“Is he going to make me cook it dry,” she asked with a laugh. “Oh, dear.”

When it arrived at the table, it was exactly to his liking. Bless his heart. He'll never know what

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good seafood tastes like.

We opted to do a wine tasting before the meal. For \$9 you have a choice of a dry wine flight or sweet wine flight. The staff brings you five of each.



Our favorites were the Sangiovese (dry red) at \$17 a bottle and the Moscato Reserve 2011 (sweet) at \$19. While choosing a wine can be intimidating, staff at Los Pinos are careful to ask and answer questions to help find just the right pairing.

“We enjoy having experts here who really know what they want,” chef said. “But, we don't ever want people to feel that you must be an expert. If you want to drink your red wine cold, drink it cold. It's up to you.”

The truffle mac 'n' cheese came to the table steaming hot, topped with delicious bread crumbs and stuffed with tender macaroni swimming in a rich, but delicate cheese sauce. The portion size was very generous, leaving us enough to heat up for Sunday lunch. Perfection.



The tapas platter would serve four comfortably. It is served with generous portions of homemade baguettes, fresh olive oil, garlic and basil dipping sauce, delicious Italian salami, manchego cheese, sharp cheddar cheese, Mediterranean olives, seasonal grapes and the cheese toes.

Next time I go back, it's going to be a on Sunday, and I'm going to laze away the afternoon with a bottle of the Sangiovese and munch on the tapas platter as I watch the day float by.

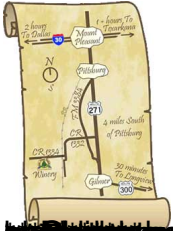
We topped off the evening with carrot cake (\$6), cappuccino chocolate chip gelato (\$4) and double chocolate chip gelato (\$4). Not sure how one could choose a favorite, but I'll say this – I never thought I'd be enjoying gelato (a rich, creamy Italian version of ice cream) in the middle of a pasture in Camp County.

Los Pinos winery and restaurant are located at 658 CR 1334 near Pittsburg. They are open Friday and Saturday from noon until 11 p.m. and on Sunday from noon until 6 p.m. They do not accept reservations. To contact them, call 903-855-1769. Print out a Google map or use a reliable GPS to get there. My suggestion is to go through Pittsburg on Highway 11 and turn right on US 271, then right onto FM 3384, CR1332 and CR1334.

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