



VPR International, a software start-up in Princeton, feels like a college reunion. Page 32.

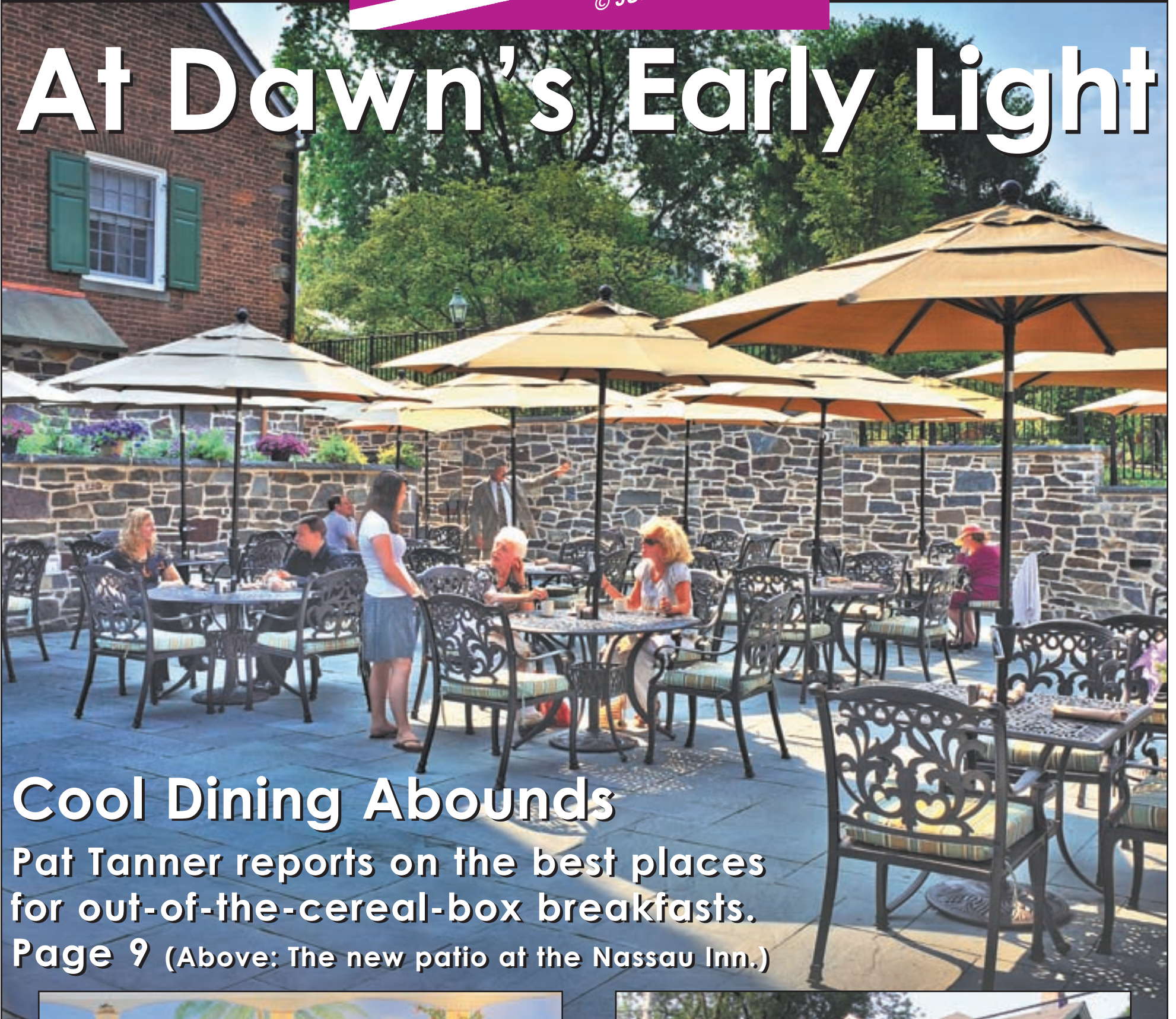
Kim Guadagno Defines Her Role, 4; Melissa Etheridge, 19; Fashions for Museums, 23; Putting the You in YouTube, 36.

U.S. 1

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At Dawn's Early Light



Cool Dining Abounds

Pat Tanner reports on the best places for out-of-the-cereal-box breakfasts. Page 9 (Above: The new patio at the Nassau Inn.)



Calico Grill in Princeton offers a Mexican twist.



The Cafe in Rosemont: 19th century setting.

PREVIEW

Fried? Let Someone Else Cook You Breakfast



by Pat Tanner

Breakfast in the Country

At the Cafe at Rosemont in the Hunterdon hills, the French toast, made from a baguette, comes with real maple syrup. And the Russian Peasant omelet is topped with real caviar.

Back in January I was contacted by the folks at Food Network Magazine for a story they were planning for their July/August issue on the 50 best breakfasts in the United States, one in each state. I was asked to nominate three New Jersey places, specifically with an eye toward “dishes that are memorable, wacky, locally inspired, the kind of place locals are fanatical about and where you’d want to take your out-of-town visitors.” I was pleased when they selected my number one choice: the egg-cheese-and-pork-roll sandwich at the vintage Summit Diner (in Union County).

Now I’m always looking for ways to promote New Jersey, but I was particularly psyched about this opportunity because breakfast is hands-down my favorite meal. I happily eat traditional breakfast foods — even cereal — for lunch and dinner. In fact, I prefer many of them later in the day, and I bemoan the fact that each year there are fewer and fewer places that serve breakfast at all hours (other than run-of-the-mill diners that use pre-fab mixes for hotcakes and pastured eggs from cartons. I’ll pass on those, thank you.)

The breakfast hour, it turns out, has been a rare high spot for the restaurant business in the United States over the last five years. Nation’s Restaurant News, a trade publication, cites a recent report by the NPD Group, a market research company based in Port Washington, NY, that shows that breakfast

accounted for almost 60 percent of the restaurant industry’s growth during that time and states, “if not for the increase in traffic during the morning, restaurant visit declines over the past two years would have been steeper.”

I am convinced that I personally accounted for part of that growth, at least here in the Princeton area, as I ate my way through several restaurants for this snapshot of excellent breakfast spots. Each offers something unique when it comes to the

Brunch is fine for a special Sunday but where to go for a hands-down perfect breakfast out any day? Our food writer rises to the challenge.

first meal of the day, which explains why places like diners, chain restaurants, and big hotel dining rooms are not among them. Admittedly, there are several fine restaurants in the area that serve a delicious Sunday brunch — Brothers Moon in Hopewell in particular comes to mind — but they are also not the focus here. On that note I did include Sprig & Vine, a new fine dining vegan place (U.S. 1, May 19), not only because it offers good food but because of the daunting challenge behind creating breakfast

meals without eggs, milk, and butter — not to mention bacon, sausage, pork roll, scrapple, steak, or other traditional breakfast meats.

Cafe at Rosemont

This charming spot was one of my three Food Network Magazine nominations. (The third was Mustache Bill’s Diner in Barnegat Light, which in 2009 was the first diner ever to win a James Beard Award.) With its authentic, plain-Jane country ambiance — the space started life in 1865 as a general store — this spot in the tiny village of Rosemont in Hunterdon County technically serves brunch, not breakfast, on weekends. But with a starting time of 9 a.m. and with all the breakfast must-haves on the menu, it fits my criteria. Plus, its worn wooden floors, mismatched chairs, and flea market crockery match up perfectly with the made-from-scratch fare that is a canny combination of homespun and cosmopolitan.

Four exceptionally fine, tender omelets are featured on the regular menu, but that number is always enhanced by at least two specials, perhaps, say, one featuring prosciutto and asiago, another with roasted pear and blue cheese. The Food Network folks asked me to pinpoint one special dish from each of my Jersey-centric nominees, and here it was no contest. I chose the Russian Peasant omelet, with its filling of soft chunks of red potato and its swathes of rich sour

cream festooned with scallion rings, topped with a generous amount of black lumpfish caviar. Where else can you find such delicious decadence for only \$9.50? Owner Lola Wykoff stands firm in using black lumpfish. “I tell people it may be at the bottom of the classic caviar chain, but if I used Beluga, I’d have to charge \$90!”

French toast — a gargantuan portion — delivers thick, diagonal cuts of baguette, crisp on the outside and custardy inside, and real maple syrup, of course. No matter what you choose, my advice is to also indulge in as many accoutrements as can be consumed at one sitting. Among these are a generous basket of baked goods that may include a homemade muffin (whole grain with cranberries on one visit); a warm, tender croissant that left me licking my buttery fingers; and the bread of the day. I looked askance at the thick, dark brown slabs of bread, anticipating a deadly dense, chewy “health” creation. But the reality — Russian pumpernickel — was surprisingly light, airy, and flavorful, especially when smeared with the excellent sweet butter, strawberry jam, and orange marmalade that reside on the table.

If you like home-style potatoes, by all means order a side of Pota-

toes from Heaven, the name of which is only a tad hyperbolic. Dark, crispy bits are the best part, but all is redolent of olive oil, rosemary, garlic, onion, and more than a touch of cayenne. Same directive goes for the breakfast bangers. Wykoff gets these sausage links made to the cafe’s specifications, without preservatives, by Maresca’s of Sergeantsville.

The coffee is first-rate, even the decaf, which the menu specifies is “Columbian, water-processed.” Twinings and herbal teas (including echinacea) are offered, as is lunch fare such as black bean chili, sandwiches, and salads. Reservations are not accepted for brunch, but somehow the room accommodates a steady stream of patrons without a wait.

A bonus: If you’re coming into Rosemont from the east, you will drive through New Jersey’s last remaining covered bridge. On the other side you emerge into pretty, rolling hillside dotted with picture-postcard farms.

Cafe at Rosemont, Routes 519 & 604, Rosemont. 609-397-4097, cafeatrosemont.com. Brunch: Saturday and Sunday, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

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Breakfast Destinations

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Calico Grill

This bright and airy casual spot, which opened in 2007 in the alley behind Cox's Market on Nassau Street in Princeton quickly became a personal favorite. It is owned and managed by the same folks who have operated Cox's since 2004, Marguerite and Alan Heap and Carlos Espichan. Their fare is a highly personal take on the fresh, bright cuisines of the Pacific Rim locales they know well first-hand — primarily those of California and Mexico (hence the cafe's clever name), but also those of Hawaii, Asia's Pacific coast, and Central America.

The room itself, which seats 30, makes me smile every time I enter. Two walls are painted floor-to-ceiling with a well executed mural that mimics a stone terrace looking out onto tropical seas. A painted palm even spills its fronds onto the coffered ceiling. The other walls continue the ruse with a faux treatment that evokes weathered stucco, while the floor of (real) slate tile adds to the effect. The mise-en-scene is completed with table linens that include bright orange napkins and seat cushions striped in primary colors.

Here, traditional French toast and pancakes can be had with blueberries, strawberries, or chocolate, but for a tropical touch try the mango. But what makes Calico Grill worth seeking out are the Mexican and Latino breakfast dishes: the burrito, quesadilla, "loco moco" (eggs with crab cakes, fish of the day, or grilled steak), and what the menu terms a "Spanish continental breakfast." That last, my favorite, consists of two fried eggs served with flour tortillas, sides of fried plantains and small black beans, and pots of creamy white queso fresco and mild, house-made tomato salsa. Along with a mug of Seattle's Best coffee or one of the Shangri La teas, this is my idea of breakfast heaven.

If what you order doesn't include a side of the plantains, I strongly urge you to order these sticky-sweet, sticky-starchy treats. Oh yes: plus an order of Spanish-style chorizo. It comes incorporated into the breakfast quesadilla, a satisfying concoction of scrambled eggs, molten cheddar, and sauteed peppers and onions in a flour tortilla. The quesadilla is served with rice cooked in what looks to be the water from black beans.

Calico Grill, alley behind Cox's Market, 180 Nassau Street. 609-924-0500, coxsmarket.com. Breakfast: Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to noon; Saturday and Sunday, 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.



Princeton Eats: A pair of out-of-towners, above left, and commercial real estate developer Jamie Herring and his girls start the day off right at the Calico Grill. Above: No need to wait for dinner to dine al fresco at the new Nassau Inn Patio.

Nassau Inn Patio

In late May the venerable Nassau Inn unveiled its long-awaited patio next to Lindt Chocolates on Palmer Square — and boy is it ever worth the wait. On a beautiful day this attractive fieldstone-and-floral space ranks among the top choices in Princeton for al fresco dining.

As they say in real estate, location, location, location — and so it is with this most appealing spot. Wisely, the space was excavated so the patio sits below ground level (or at least, it gives that impression) and, streetside, a tall stone wall capped by stone planters bursting with colorful flowers effectively obscures the sights and sounds of passing traffic and parked cars. Tan umbrellas help keep the sun from beating down on the traditional black metal patio tables and extra-wide chairs with deep, striped cushions. Service is neither rushed nor rushing. At least on one weekday morning, we lingered as long as we wished while other patrons read their Kindles, fired up their laptops, and talked on their cell phones.

The food is typical of a medium-size hotel. The patio offers the same breakfast, lunch, and dinner menus as served in the inn's restaurant, the Yankee Doodle Tap Room. The menus were recently developed by chef Matt Volpe. The breakfast offerings include some modern, beckoning choices like beignets, a breakfast wrap, omelets with chorizo or feta, and dried cherry and mascarpone pancakes.

I tried one such update: the breakfast panini. Pressed inside slices of thick, grilled brioche are a two-egg omelet, Canadian bacon, and bright orange cheddar. All flavors seem a bit muted, and the

brioche itself has the consistency of white bread. It comes with O'Brien potatoes — now there's a throwback! — but one I welcome. This version, however, has no trace of the red and green peppers that define the dish.

If you find yourself dining with children, either the chocolate chip and banana pancakes or the mixed berry stuffed French toast should be a hit. The latter falls squarely into the dessert-masquerading-as-breakfast category that, truth be told, as many adults as children favor. It utilizes that same rather airy brioche, is liberally drizzled with a sweeter-than-sweet raspberry sauce, and is dusted with powdered sugar.

Next time I go — and there will be a next time, because this space is drawing me like a magnet — I'll opt for the simpler choices, like the fruit plate with yogurt or the oatmeal with dried cranberries. And I'll repeat the real estate mantra, "location, location, location," while sipping the inn's very good coffee.

Nassau Inn Patio, 10 Palmer Square, next to Lindt Chocolates. 609-921-7500, nassauinn.com. Breakfast: Seven days a week (weather permitting), 7 a.m. to 11:30 a.m.

Teresa's Caffe

This, the most casual of the restaurants owned by the Terra Momo Group (which also includes Mediterra, Eno Terra, and the Witherspoon Bread Company), has been a perennial favorite with area diners, including me, for its authentic trattoria ambiance and its consistently good food and drink

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