



Get Clean, Go Green at The Cove

A UNIQUE SOUTH SAN HYBRID

By Michele Omenson
Photography by Wendi Poole

When Lisa and Sam Asvestas left the kitchen exhaust system business, they never really left the kitchen. “We thought it would be fun to open a restaurant,” Lisa laughs. “With no experience.”

It was a brilliant business plan, really. They began with a self-service car wash and Laundromat, and sold sandwiches. Lisa and Sam eventually added a bar and booked live music, maintaining a family-friendly environment. But the final transformation came a few years ago when the restaurant went green, offering sustainably grown organic food.

In its eight years, The Cove’s operation changed from ice-cream-scoop-and-toaster-oven offerings to those of an impressive restaurant. It’s probably the only car wash/Laundromat/green restaurant in the country, an unlikely combo but one that’s worked for Lisa and Sam, and for their loyal patrons.

It has established a presence on review pages and the Food Network and attracted a broad base of customers. Not bad for a girl who grew up on TV dinners and macaroni and cheese. “It kind of happened in phases,” Lisa says. “About four years ago, I started eating better. I had difficulty serving things I wouldn’t eat, and so I tried to give San Antonio more options.”

The healthful menu changes are the result of a collaboration with chef Michael Sohocki, whom Lisa found through a Craigslist query. The advertisement read, “Looking for a cook with passion for good food,” Lisa recalls. Sohocki, a graduate of the Culinary Institute in Hyde Park, New York, fit the bill. “I wanted a place that was similar to what I would open if I had my own place,” Sohocki says.

Corpus Christi natives who grew up near each other but never met, Lisa and her new chef discovered a mutual interest in how diet affects disposition. If the two shared a bookshelf, it would display titles like Michael Pollan’s

ORGANIC JALAPEÑO CARROT CAKE



The Omnivore's Dilemma and Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*. From those studies evolved The Cove's "SOL food" — that's sustainable, organic and local.

All beef, bison and lamb come from grass-fed animals and end up as burgers as inventive as they are healthy. Even the chickens — field-raised, hormone- and antibiotic-free — are purchased whole and live from the same rancher and processed on-site. Bones are used for soup stock, breast meat for sandwiches and dark meat for nachos. Nothing is wasted. Sohocki has even whipped up a Cabernet pâté in an ultimate exercise in poultry resourcefulness. "We try to use it in a holistic fashion," he says.

Serving SOL food is about improvising with the freshest ingredients of the season, which sometimes contribute to off-the-menu selections. When Sohocki's mother delivered a batch of wild apples from her farm in Alabama, he produced a limited offering of apple tarts and salads.

Building on the signature grilled tilapia fish tacos that put the restaurant on the map, the chef's menu contributions include a Mediterranean plate with hummus, falafel and a Moroc-

can sweet potato salad. His two years living in Japan reveal their influence in unsuspecting places like organic sweet potato fries sprinkled with gomasio, a highly nutritional blend of sesame seeds with three kinds of seaweed and sea salt.

The Cove's commitment to sustainability doesn't stop with healthy stock and pesticide-free greens. To-go containers are made from sugar cane pulp, and cups are constructed from corn — both biodegradable. "It's costly," they concede, "but you've got to do what you believe in."

So is it good food or good practice that attracts foodies to this funky little spot where ambiance might come as easily from a local jazz band as the sound of gleam wax jet? "It's a mixture of the two," Sohocki says. "The ones who believe in local, organic and sustainable are much more loyal customers." Still, a fair number patronize The Cove without an understanding of the green food. "They come here because it tastes good. We're grateful for both," he says. "I just hope that somehow their bodies will know," Lisa adds. "And that they'll say, 'Hey, I feel better.'" 🌱

≡ Critic's picks

DRINK: Chimay Blue Label Belgian Ale

APPETIZER: Organic sweet potato fries and the organic vegetarian sampler with Moroccan sweet potato salad

SALAD: Baby spinach house salad with mushrooms, red onions and honey mustard, topped with a fresh tortilla heart for "a little love," and Cate's spring mix salad with organic grilled apples, goat cheese and vinaigrette

ENTRÉE: Famous grilled tilapia taco with cilantro coleslaw and spicy poblano sauce is easily rivaled by the Latin-spiced lamb burger with cotija cheese

DESSERT: Organic jalapeño carrot cake with lime and cream cheese icing

≡ Fast facts

PROPRIETORS: Lisa and Sam Asvestas

CUISINE: Sustainable, organic and local (SOL) American

CAPACITY: 200-plus

AMBIANCE: Casual cool

DÉCOR: Local artwork lines the walls of a rustic bar and stage area. The patio has folding chairs, beer umbrellas and strings of chile pepper lights.

SERVICE: Ample, attentive and friendly

PRICES: Everything less than \$10

RESERVATIONS: Recommended for large parties or to request a certain table during entertainment hours

CREDIT CARDS: All major

HOURS: Mon., 1 a.m.-3 p.m.; Tue-Sat., 11 a.m.-11 p.m.; closed Sun. Car wash open 24 hours; Laundromat open daily, 8 a.m.-11 p.m.

NOISE LEVEL: Peaceful to loud depending on car wash activity and live music schedule

HANDICAP ACCESS: Yes

PARKING: Free adjacent lot

OTHER: Live music Tue-Sat.; wine and beer tastings; enclosed play area for children

ADDRESS: 606 W. Cypress (in the 5 Points District)

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