

Someone's In The Kitchen

Rodney's Steakhouse: Not Your Average Hotel Meal

By **RICHARD** and **AMANDA PAYATT**
Special to CASA

EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE ARE **WONDERFUL THINGS.** Hotel kitchens in America do not have the best reputation. Lucky for us, Santa Barbara is a notable exception. The Biltmore and San Ysidro Ranch hotels are rightly famous for their cuisine. Rodney's Steakhouse, located at the Fess Parker Doubletree, is another entry into that category.

Kirk DeLong rules the roost at Rodney's, as well as managing the hotel's four other restaurants, catering, and room service operations. Under normal circumstances, one would blanch at the idea of one man, handling over a thousand covers a day at a big hotel, being able to manage a top quality small restaurant as a part of this operation. But it should be remembered that Santa Barbara's beloved John Downey, of Downey's, used to cook for two thousand people a night on the QEII ocean liner. And, like John, Kirk has been trained to think big, while keeping an eye on the individual diner.

Kirk got started in cooking because of a complete disaster. He was taking

a high school Home-Ec class, and was given the assignment of cooking dinner for his own family. At that point Kirk preferred playing baseball to cooking, but it was a class assignment, so he had to do it. He made a quiche for his family. But, it was terrible. He misread the

direction of 1 ½ teaspoons of salt for 1 ½ cups of salt! Needless to say, the resulting meal was inedible. The family wouldn't eat more than one bite. Kirk decided to eat his slice, just to show them up. He got a stomachache, and the determination to live down the defeat. By the end of high school, he had kicked his parents out of the kitchen, and was doing all of the cooking for the family.



Kirk DeLong, Rodney's
Steakhouse Executive Chef

Kirk went on to the San Francisco Culinary Academy to get his education. From there, he went on to Kelley's Mission Rock restaurant in San Francisco, and the Doubletree Inn in San Jose. But the job that prepared him for Rodney's was the Wailea Resort Hotel on Maui. The Wailea is one of world's great resorts, with 700 rooms, six restaurants, and four bars. Kirk spent seven years there, honing his skills, and working with some of the best chefs in the world. For

a while he ran the catering operation there, and was also Department Chef. Unfortunately, he realized that he could never make Executive Chef anywhere in Hawaii. Why? If you had such a position in Hawaii, would you ever leave that restaurant? So, Kirk came to the next most wonderful place that chefs never leave: Santa Barbara.

Kirk has been running Rodney's since 2007. He keeps the expansive, spacious kitchens clean and organized. It is a pleasure to behold the acres of gleaming stainless steel and quarry tile that make up this workspace.

Rodney's Steakhouse serves mostly steaks. This is hardly surprising. However, with a 1650-degree infrared broiler, the steaks come out fast, and they come out good. They are perfectly seared and amazingly juicy. Let's face it, you just can't make a steak like this at home. The sauces accompanying the steaks are also fine, and don't forget to get the steak fries. Kirk also does more than just steak. The lobster pot pie appetizer came complete with diced carrots, peas, and everything that you would expect in a pot pie. It was a kick in the pants. His petrale sole stuffed with crab is done just the way that you would expect to have it prepared in Hawaii. The crab cakes are on

the sweet side, perhaps another Hawaiian holdover; but they were perfectly paired with the recommended wine, so we have to give that combination two thumbs up. The wine list is good. It does have a lot of local wines, and it should come as no shock that it is heavy with Fess Parker's wines. Many of the wine pairings are aimed at the Fess Parker wines.

Overall, the restaurant is a quiet place. It is warm, serene, and unexpectedly calm in the midst of a busy hotel. With a bar that seems taller than most one will see in restaurants, it feels elegant and artistic in a New York City kind of way. The barman makes a most excellent martini. It just seems the place to sit and have a quiet evening. It is unusual for a hotel to feel like a local place, or a local place for good food. Kirk, however, is just the man for the job.

Rodney's Steak House is located at 633 E. Cabrillo Blvd. Open nightly 5 to 10pm. Reach them at 884-8554.



Amanda and Richard Payatt combine their considerable writing skills with their incredible knowledge and experience of fine dining to bring you this column.