Suggested caption for photo:

Sasha Butinas, owner of the House of Bogini restaurant, with one of her creative menu items.

Suggested headline:

*House of Bogini: Feed the tummy, feed the mind*

**By Bill Barth and Stephanie Klett**

Come for the extraordinary menu. Linger for a learning experience.

The House of Bogini – open just over a year at 152 Center St., Lake Geneva – is a small space with big ambitions. It’s unique. Like its owner, the irrepressible Sasha Butinas.

Our experience began with a 90th birthday celebration for family friend Norma Saxon, accompanied by Norma’s son Billy and Stephanie’s mom, Joanne. Greeting us with a big smile and exuberant manner, all Sasha had to do was ask for our drink order to quickly indicate this would not be an ordinary lunch.

Every one of us stared at the menu, puzzling over the curious collection. Here’s a drink example, because Norma and Bill picked the same concoction, called Sea Lemonade. The menu describes it as “handcrafted lemonade, spirulina, agave.” After the first sip, Bill shortened the description to “heavenly.”

We could have picked from an interesting beer and wine selection, but it wasn’t that kind of lunch. We were on the clock.

The menu is thought-provoking, and a full description is necessary to capture the essence. Let’s cite two appetizer examples: (1) Gorgonzola Brie Onion Tart, flaky puff pastry baked with melted Brie, Gorgonzola crumbles, and caramelized onions, drizzled with fig glaze; (2) Olive Hummus, salty, creamy olive blended with chickpeas, served with panini pita and veggies.

A sampling of salads: (1) Pear and Pecan Gorgonzola, assorted organic greens with sliced Asian pears, crumbled Gorgonzola, toasted pecans, with a side of zesty sweet beet balsamic dressing, and (2) Hangover Salad, “when you need to restore and refresh,” with beans, quinoa, veggies, sun dried tomatoes, sweet potato chips,sunflower seeds,chia seeds, hemp hearts and microgreens. Add a side of whole grain panini pita, with almond butter and sliced strawberries.

For a main course, here are three from the list: (1) Mediterranean Pizza, with feta, sun dried tomatoes, kalamata olives, fresh spinach, drizzled with balsamic glaze; (2) Wagyu Ground Beef Street Tacos, with cheddar and pico, on flour street taco, with a side of organic blue corn chips; and (3) Peruvian Chicken Wing with creamy green sauce, marinated Peruvian spiced full chicken wing, with a Greek yogurt dipping sauce tasting of cilantro, lime and jalapeno. Served with Mediterranean salad tossed in scratch-made Greek dressing, topped with feta and kalamata.

Here’s a confession: Farm-raised Bill – a meat and potatoes guy – stared indecisively at the menu. We include that because, one, it’s not an unusual reaction at House of Bogini and, two, Sasha is not only capable of talking it through successfully with diners, she lives for that opportunity.

That’s because House of Bogini – by the way, Bogini means goddess in Polish and Russian – is not just a restaurant for Sasha. It’s a means to an end, to spread a message one diner at a time about clean cuisine, respecting our bodies to encourage better health, all while connecting with and protecting the environment.

“When I designed this space, it opens up conversations that allow me to have a voice, because it’s not like anything else,” she said. “I’m going to listen to the land. I’m going to listen to the planet.”

House of Bogini is relatively new, but Sasha has been on this journey for years. She grew up in Walworth County, but moved to Las Vegas after school and gained experience in the restaurant industry. Eventually, she moved back to the Lake Geneva area to raise her child, and continued to experiment with nutrition, horticulture and development of skin care lines, along with blending herbs, teas, growing microgreens and mixing salads and juices. Working out of her home, “I began putting people on regimens. They kept coming to me saying I want what you’ve got – pure nutrition, about what you’re putting into your body and onto your body.”

Before House of Bogini there was “Barefoot Blonde Farms,” Sasha’s continuing grow business where she cultivates microgreens and more. She’s also a big believer in farmers markets like the one in Lake Geneva. She’s already planning the next venture, which she calls DG Organics, involving more land and the ability to scale up.  It’s all about spreading the healthy-living word, which is why Sasha wanted to keep her restaurant small allowing her to spend time interacting individually with customers.

“I am in love with this planet, and I need that,” she said of her experiences with clients. “I need the Mother Earth to be in the conversation as much as possible. (There are cuisine conversations) with almost every table, which is why I wanted to stay small, because I knew there was going to be a lot of communication. It’s important to get across and explain what people may not know.”

Sasha is not preachy. She’s light and ebullient, cheery and fun-loving. Here’s how she wins people over: “I listen more than I talk.”

Her place is busy. Reservations, especially for weekends, are recommended. House of Bogini is open Wednesday through Sunday for lunch and dinner. There’s live music on Wednesdays, along with Ladies Night. As for what’s new, Sasha is excited to roll out what she says will be a unique sidewalk dining experience when weather allows.

We asked her, since her business is unique, what she would say to encourage a first-time Lake Geneva visitor to try House of Bogini.

“You can come here to feel better. When you’re going to go out and enjoy yourself you don’t want to be weighed down. If you’re going to walk the lake path, see a festival, rent a boat, the last thing you want is to walk around feeling heavy. The cleaner that you eat, the clearer you are. Let me help enhance your experience.”

This lady is on a mission. A tasty mission, one that will teach you something worth learning.

*Bill Barth, is the former Editor of the Beloit Daily News and a member of the Wisconsin Newspaper Hall of Fame. His wife, Stephanie Klett, is the President and CEO of Visit Lake Geneva, and the former Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Tourism.*