



*Fish tacos at Blu American Eatery, Petaluma  
Jeff Kan Lee / PD*

## **SHEAS' LATEST**

**Restaurant:** Blu American Eatery, 140 Second St., Suite 100, Petaluma

**When:** Tuesday through Friday, breakfast from 7:30 to 11 a.m., lunch from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., and dinner from 5 to 9 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, breakfast from 7:30 a.m. to noon and lunch and dinner from noon to 9 p.m., except to 8 p.m. on Sunday. Closed Mondays.

**Reservations:** Not needed. Call for take-out at 707-778-6965.

**Price range:** Inexpensive to moderate, with dishes from \$8 to \$15.

**Web site:** [www.BluPetaluma.com](http://www.BluPetaluma.com)  
Wine list: 1 star

**Ambiance:** 2 stars

**Service:** 3 stars

**Food:** 3 ½ stars

**Overall:** 3 stars

## **Blu is sooo good**

**New Petaluma restaurant has food like mom would make — if mom were a great cook**

*By JEFF COX FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT*

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Blu American Eatery, the new restaurant in Petaluma, couldn't be more ordinary, serving American-style comfort food for breakfast, lunch and dinner in a lunchroom atmosphere. But it also couldn't be more extraordinary, because the food is so darn good.

The restaurant may be new, but the folks who run the place and do the cooking — Joe Shea during the day and Lori Shea in the evening — have been quietly pleasing us for many years.

Twenty years ago, they were running Caffé Giostra (a giostra is a merry-go-round in Italian) in the Orchard Supply shopping center in Petaluma. It was an unassuming little place, but usually packed with patrons who'd discovered how good the food was.

A few years ago, they opened Sugo (sugo is Italian for sauce) in a modest storefront in Petaluma's new theater district, serving straightforward southern Italian food. The Sheas' daughter Annette took over at Sugo last year, and the Sheas moved a block away to open Blu (Italian for blue) in a new building in the burgeoning district. If the word "restaurant" were spelled out in large block letters on the front of the building, it would look a lot like the place where Seinfeld's kookie crew hung out.

But no Soup Nazis here. Lori Shea has a real homey touch in Blu's open kitchen. The menu may sound like a diner — burgers, sandwiches, fish tacos, macaroni and cheese — but the dishes don't taste like diner food. They taste like something mom would have cooked at home if mom were a talented home cook.

On a recent Friday night, gaggles of young teenagers swirled down the streets of the new Petaluma. Two patrolmen walked by, just making a presence. The brand new buildings soared out of sight above the floor-to-ceiling windows on the east and north sides of the big, square restaurant, giving this re-born area of downtown a modern, urban look. Some of the youngsters came in off the street to peruse the menu. The lucky ones stayed and ordered.

Two girls about 15 or 16 at a nearby table were given a plate of calamari. “Omigod,” said one, “this is soooo good.” The Crispy Calamari (\$8) is indeed soooo good. Among its virtues is the fresh flavor of just-off-the-boat seafood. Good, clean, hot oil flash-fries the calamari without leaving any greasy residue. The batter is just lightly salted. The rings and baby squid are so tender they require little chewing — they just crunch and crinkle pleasantly in the mouth. A lemon wedge, spicy salsa, and roasted garlic aioli are on hand in case you want to dip.

The room is perfect for families with kids. Fruit juices, including fresh-squeezed orange, are available for the kids, along with four menu items for those 12 and under (half a grilled cheese sandwich with fries for \$4). For the adults, there’s a short wine list. A few notables are the DeLoach Pinot Noir for \$35, a Gnarly Head Cabernet Sauvignon from Lodi for \$23, and Red Guitar from Spain for \$23. Among whites, the St. Supery Sauvignon Blanc from Dollarhide Ranch in Pope Valley for \$35 and Hogue Pinot Grigio from Washington State for \$27 are excellent values. Nothing posh, just delicious wines at reasonable prices.

A big bowl of New England Clam Chowder (\$5) was impossibly good for the price. Not only was the portion generous, the creamy soup was loaded with chopped clams. Bacon and bits of potato and celery added to the fun. Ray Charles sang from the sound system. All this scene needed was a sunset over Buzzard’s Bay.

At most restaurants, salads can be pretty routine affairs, but the Berried Treasure Chicken Salad (\$10) was as fun and exciting as a salad can be. The salad looks like garden-fresh lettuces topped with a grilled marinated chicken breast sliced into half-inch strips. But not all is revealed at first glance. As you dig into the lettuces, which are dressed with honey vinaigrette, you begin to discover the berried treasure: raspberries, slices of strawberries, blueberries, bits of orange wedges and walnuts hide down among the mixed greens. One can only imagine what the salads will be like in the summertime when all these fruits are fresh and local.

Knowing that kids of all ages love macaroni and cheese, Lori has concocted a Penne Mac & Cheese (\$8). Penne pasta, instead of the usual elbow macaroni, is buried under a ton of cheddar, fontina and gruyere cheeses topped with herbed bread crumbs. For two bucks more, you can get Zoe smoked bacon on top, and for three bucks, grilled chicken breast. But this mac and cheese needs nothing but a fork. It comes bubbled brown on top and offers some serious flavor.

The fish tacos at Sooze Wine Bar, just a couple of blocks away in the Petaluma Great Mill, are wonderful, but the Fish Tacos (\$12) at Blu are just as good. They’re served on flour tortillas that are filled with lots of flaky grilled rock cod, finely shredded slaw, and salsa, all topped with a plop of spiced-up mayo. You get two of these big beauties for your money, plenty for a whole meal in themselves.

There are five burgers on the menu, all with meat ground daily from Harris Ranch beef. The Triple Cheeseburger (\$11) is about as good as any burger gets. It’s a good half pound of meat grilled so the interior is pink, then topped with cheddar, fontina and gruyere cheeses. Sautéed mushrooms are loaded on, and you can add slices of pickle, tomato and raw onion if you choose. The perfect bun is big enough to hold all this. It’s accompanied by lots of crispy french fries.

The Sheas have the good sense not to call their New York Strip Sandwich (\$11) a “Philly cheese steak,” as so many restaurants do, because it’s nothing like a true steak sandwich. It is grilled, sliced strip steak cooked medium rare and laid on panini along with roasted bell peppers, caramelized red onion and melted cheddar cheese. It comes with a salad of mixed, fresh lettuces.

For dessert, what else but a big piece of Apple Pie (\$6)? The pie is piled high with apples, not too sweet, not too gooey, not too much cinnamon, and with a flaky crust. Like mom used to make, if mom could cook.

To sum up: The Sheas are back in town and cooking up a storm — as usual.