

Zombies and Foie Gras: Carmel Valley Ranch pulls in big award via Condé Nast.

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Mark Anderson



The s'mores service may be CVR's simplest luxury, and its most popular.

For **Jack** and **Luke Sinclitico**, the marshmallows alone merit a major award.

They are the miniature humanoids joining me at **Carmel Valley Ranch's Valley Kitchen** (1-855-OUR-RANCH) last week.

For me, the food would be enough for said award.

For others, it's all about the sunshine, zombies and honey bees.

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Dinner served sufficient reminder why Exec Chef Tim Wood and his team have put together an impressive run with our annual readers poll in the category Best Monterey County Chef.

His wakame seaweed salad-poke dish (\$18) melts on the tongue, with the added luxury of ripe avocado and flavor-burst citrus olive oil.

The filet (\$46), his choice on this given night for the rotating chef's cutting board special, also does that melting magic on the palate.

He sent out some luxurious off-menu indulgences: 1) a fresh corn-polenta dish with olive-oil-braised pulled pork he's prepping for an upcoming food festival and various specials and 2) a revelatory wonder he called "cinnamon toast crunch" lumped with foie gras.

He thinks of it as a play on what historically happens with foie gras in Europe, where a classic accompaniment is spiced bread.

There's more to it than that, but its core identity is clear to Wood.

"We build on tradition, but we don't have to be full of ourselves," he says. "That's like a Sunday brunch at my house. It tastes good."

The little Sincliticos were ready to adjourn the meal about two minutes into deconstructing their cheese pizzas with grotesque flair.

(A note there: Local parents looking for a hospitable environment have a solid option here. It is a mid-Valley trek, but in 1,000 meals out this eater has never seen a service team so ready to gather baby shrapnel or coax out potential stains from the booth seating.)

The marshmallows—part of the fireside s'mores service by the pool—represent a small and thoughtful part of the on-campus activities that turned the voter tide in the Condé Nast Traveler Readers' Choice Awards.

Some 300,000 readers—a huge leap over last year's votership—cast votes for 7,394 hotels, 606 cities, 500 cruise ships and 236 islands.

The honors rank among the longest-running and most sought-after prizes in the travel industry.

The winners get their spotlight with the November issue of Condé Nast Traveler, on newsstands today (Oct. 25).

CVR won for best resort in Northern California, not exactly an uncompetitive category.

I understand why they won.

The rooms—more like condos—are high-ceiling sanctuaries with nice appointments, big decks and broad valley views.

There's golf, tennis and multiple swimming pools maintained with fierce attention to detail.

But then there's a whole other programming element, including a "kid's corral" where youngsters can rope horses, visits to the chicken coop and field trips in the chef's garden run by mad genius Mark Marino.

Some other atypical elements from CRV:

Horsemanship • Seasoned pro Jill Rivoli leads guests through the self-awareness and communication skills to connect on the equine and introspective plane.

Bee Experience • More than 60,000 Italian honeybees call CVR's apiary home, and generate a buzz with guests in beekeeper suits as they learn about the interplay of 7,000 on-property lavender plants and other bee complexities.

Color War • Friends and/or co-workers are divided into color-coded teams and compete in things like classic dodge ball tournaments, cocktail competitions, tricycle relays and more.

Zombie Romp • Oct. 3, the meadows surrounding the Hilltop Yoga Platform above were taken over by three groups given zombie survival skills in three categories—archery, combat self-defense and first aid for wounds caused by the undead. The teams then took to an obstacle course with a rope climb, barrel roll, plank walk and army crawl, while fighting off marauding zombies and saving injured civilians (played by staff members).

It's all more than enough to inspire a deep nostalgic bond with the feelings of summer camp, for those who can afford it.

Individuals not wanting to spring for the spendier activities can always retreat to the s'mores.



The Ranch Manhattan fits snugly into the signature drink lineup.



Cabanas rim the upper pool; the lower pool enjoys its own foodie market/deli/kitchen and Thursday pizza nights.



A network of hiking trails evoke Garland Park.



The seaweed salad-poke bowl presents a minor masterpiece.



A CVR spokesperson says as part of the zombie team building: "At the end, the entire group worked together to beat back one last zombie insurgency with bows and arrows. The arrows had foam balls on the ends, so no zombies were harmed in the making of this apocalypse."



Ed Foley

Beekeeping has proven to be CVR's most popular extracurricular.