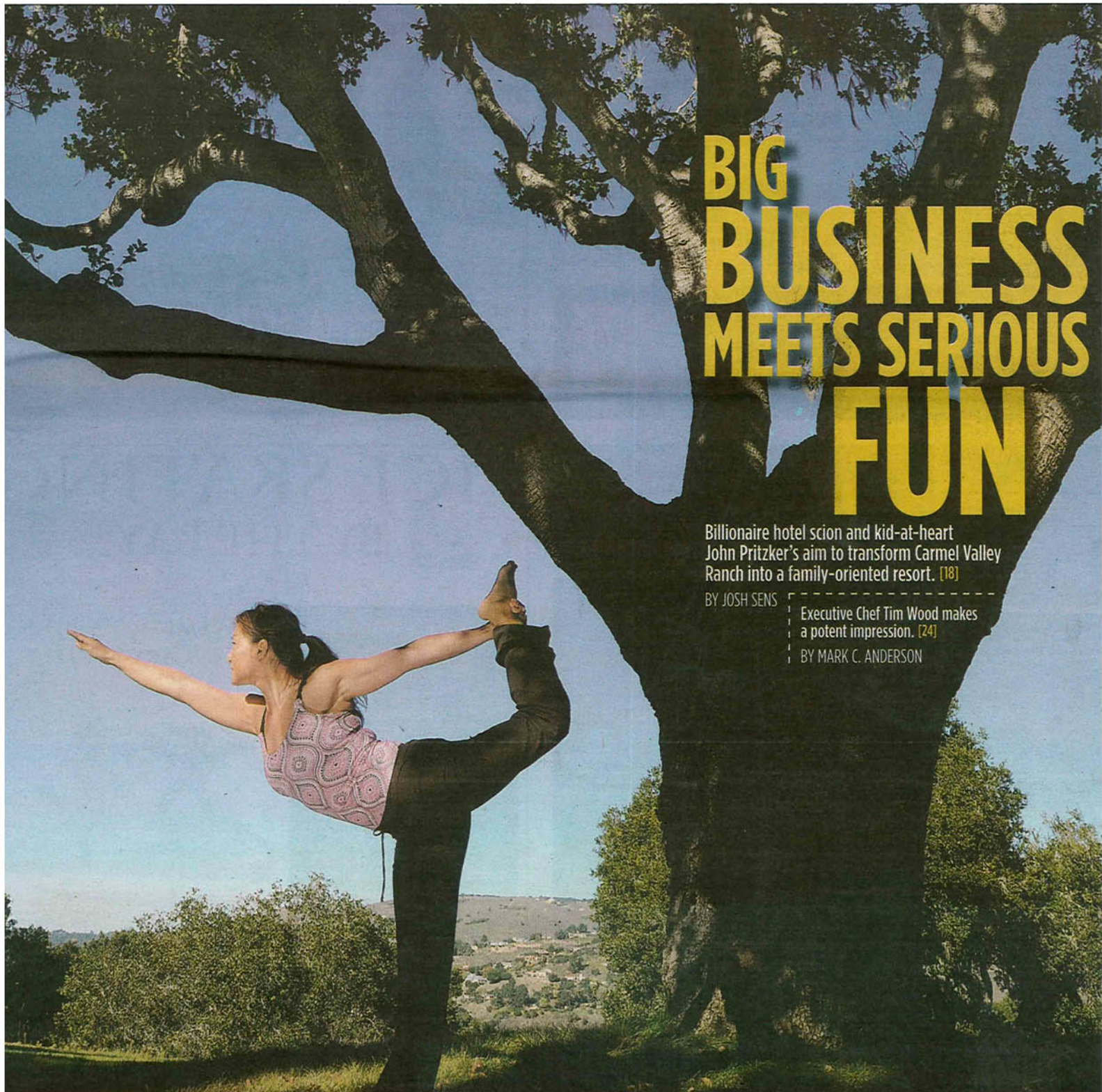


MONTEREY COUNTY WEEKLY



BIG BUSINESS MEETS SERIOUS FUN

Billionaire hotel scion and kid-at-heart
John Pritzker's aim to transform Carmel Valley
Ranch into a family-oriented resort. [18]

BY JOSH SENS

Executive Chef Tim Wood makes
a potent impression. [24]

BY MARK C. ANDERSON

CHILDHOOD DREAMS, ADULT AMBITIONS

HYATT HEIR JOHN PRITZKER CAME TO CALIFORNIA IN THE '70S FOR THE MUSIC SCENE. NOW HE COMES TO CARMEL VALLEY WITH A NEW VISION—TURNING CARMEL VALLEY RANCH INTO AN ALWAYS-OPEN, EVERYONE-WELCOME VERSION OF SUMMER CAMP.

By Josh Sens

Like many billionaires, Hyatt heir John Pritzker is not immune to the lure of boyish acquisitions. Among his is a 2002 Aston Martin that is not just the same model but the very vehicle that Pierce Brosnan drove in a James Bond film. Pritzker uses the car to commute around San Francisco, where he lives and where his private-equity firm is located, but it makes him uneasy when others focus on it. He's wary of perceptions, and he'd rather not be seen as that guy.

The possession to which Pritzker prefers to draw attention cost him far more than his sports car did, even though he got it for a song: The sprawling Carmel Valley Ranch, set on 490 acres in the sylvan valley of the same name.

The ranch became Pritzker's last year, when his Geolo Capital bought it from the Blackstone Group for \$20 million, down from an asking price of \$95 million. No sooner had the ranch become his than Pritzker set about overhauling it. He has committed an additional \$35 million to transform the property from a golf retreat with a starchy reputation into a family-friendly destination, as well as a flagship in the hotel fleet of Joie de Vivre, Chip Conley's well-known Northern California hospitality brand—which, it so happens, Pritzker's company has snatched up, too.

Named by *Forbes* in 2009 as the 236th-richest person in America (estimated net worth then: \$1.5 billion), Pritzker can afford to be bullish at a time when the hotel industry is overrun with bears. But his investment involves more than financial risk. At Carmel Valley Ranch, Pritzker has staked his name—and has stamped his whimsical vision—on the dominant property in a valley where others with deep pockets have flourished before.

Pritzker is confident that his fate will be different. As he sees it, past owners of the ranch (there have been four since it

opened, in 1981) failed to take advantage of its location in one of California's most distinctive spots, where an urbane present rubs up against a rustic past. In its original incarnation, the property was a private golf club. Then, in 1987, the members-only club morphed into a stiff-lipped resort with an image at odds with its surroundings.

Locals already know it, but Carmel Valley's charm makes travelers feel as if they've stumbled on a secret, despite ample evidence that others have arrived long before. Carmel Valley Road relaxes into curves as it leaves civilization behind, and cowboy bars and boutiques share space with saddlery shops and spas. In the foothills, north and south, hiking and horseback-riding trails wind through a patchwork of cattle ranches and acres planted with pinot. The "village," meanwhile, draws tourists as well as the locals. There are tasting rooms, but their counters aren't clogged with boisterous clinky-drinkers. It's a region with brilliant wines but no wine train (though there's a trolley). A five-car backup on Carmel Valley Road is a traffic jam.

Pritzker's plans call for a signature resort that reflects the setting, blending familiar upscale touches—a spa, farm-fresh cuisine—with earthbound programs such as guided nature walks, beekeeping, organic gardening, and culinary classes for adults and kids. Pritzker says this blueprint is custom-designed to tap into the market of 10 million people in Silicon Valley, San Francisco, and beyond, a Northern California population filled with active travelers who often make rustic getaways to Napa and Sonoma and who would leap at all that Carmel Valley has to offer, if only it were on their radar screens.

"Is this the next Napa?" Pritzker asks. "I don't draw that parallel, because I think Carmel Valley is already better than Napa. Think about it. You go to wine country with the family, and after

continued on page 20



Branching Out: New CVR owner John Pritzker takes a break beneath one of the area's many venerable oaks. Some drip swingsets; others look in on the resort lobby through big windows (below left). At the lobby's retail shop (below right), as with the recreational activities, the most popular picks are classic outdoors—like cooking s'mores



a day or two, you've done all there is to do. Here, you've got the Monterey Bay Aquarium, Big Sur, Carmel. It's pretty much endless. It's just not always the first place on people's minds." So Pritzker has set out to change that, to tell the world about a more intimate wine country that's nearer to the sea and has fewer airs.

That Carmel Valley hasn't appeared on the average traveler's It List for decades is partly a function of geography and partly its own fault. On the one hand, in the quest for recognition, it's hard to compete with Carmel, Cannery Row, or 17-Mile Drive, to name only a few of the area's iconic destinations. But over the years, attempts to brand the valley have focused largely on what the region isn't: not as crowded as Monterey; not as foggy as Carmel; not as expensive as Pebble Beach. Faced with the image vacuum, many people today either ignore Carmel Valley or conflate it with prettified, commercialized Carmel.

The most specific marketing has emphasized the valley as a golf destination, but the golf industry is in the doldrums. Golf's weakness as a draw was punctuated last year, when Quail Lodge, a golf resort and the second-largest hotel in the valley, announced that it was shuttering its guestrooms and becoming merely a golf club.

To watch Quail's silver-haired four-somes roam the fairways is to recognize another of the valley's image problems: "It's where your wealthy grandparents went to get away," says one San Francisco-based travel industry consultant who asked to remain anonymous. That impression is underscored by the valley's many famous residents (Clint Eastwood, Merv Griffin, Joan Fontaine, and Doris Day have all owned homes here; Rupert Murdoch owns a ranch at the valley's eastern edge) and by the fact that the region has long served as a country playground for the aging super-rich. As early as the 1920s, a rancher named George Gordon Moore released Russian boars onto his property and used them for his guest's hunting pleasure. Their feral descendants often tear up fairways in the valley today. Later came Eastwood, who, in 1998, built the Tehama Golf Course development in the valley's northern hills; and before

Eastwood, John Gardiner, a sporty entrepreneur who, in 1957, founded John Gardiner's Tennis Ranch, an exclusive camp for the very wealthy.

Joe Passov, a former tennis instructor who taught at Gardiner's Ranch in the early 1980s, recalls overhearing a conversation between several of his privileged students. The boys were engaged in a game of one-upmanship, comparing how many airplanes their fathers owned. Two. Three. The number kept increasing. When it came time for one young Rockefeller—an actual one, Passov believes—to register a tally, he paused and asked sincerely, "Do helicopters count?"

As a scion of one of the country's most prominent families—his financier father, Jay, founded Hyatt Hotels & Resorts; his cousin Penny Pritzker oversaw the fundraising for Obama's campaign; his parents established the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize—Pritzker could get around by helicopter if he wanted to. But on a recent weekday, he opted for the Aston Martin, driving two hours south from San Francisco in order to show off his new backyard. "Look at this," he says. "I think the previous owners forgot that this was all part of their property."

It's a hazy Wednesday morning, and Pritzker, wearing hiking boots and shorts, hoofs up a trail that winds into the foothills of the Santa Lucia Mountains, the scrub oak-studded backdrop to Carmel Valley Ranch. Behind him, stretching from the hillside toward the base of the valley, lies the resort's developed footprint: the golf course, the guestrooms, the swimming pools, the spa. But before him, just beyond a ridgeline to the southwest, spreads a vast expanse of open space—the outer boundaries of the ranch, bleeding into the 5,000-foot peaks of the Ventana Wilderness, which reaches south into Big Sur.

Though a cold has left him feeling subpar, Pritzker, who is 57, with a fire-plug build and a thick sweep of black hair, walks fast and speaks even faster as he recalls his first encounter with the ranch. "I remember driving in and thinking, 'This is nice,'" he says, repeating a well-worn but effective anecdote at the heart of his pitch. "As they were showing me around, I kept asking, 'Is this part of



Harvest Heaven: Some 7,500 lavender plants now populate the CVR premises; Mark Marino's garden houses sunflowers, romanesco broccoli, rainbow chard and much more, with lots of room to grow.

the property? And this? And this? That's when it started to hit me what we had."

The trail leads to a plateau, where a large oak tree shades a wooden platform: the resort's open-air yoga pavilion, a foundation for one of many outdoor programs. A two-acre organic farm is being planted, along with four acres of vineyards and five acres of lavender fields. Guests who aren't busy hiking with a bird expert or gazing at the stars with an astronomer might opt to harvest the fragrant flowers and, under the guidance of an instructor, turn them into soaps and essential oils. Or they might enjoy those products at the spa.

"I hate to sound too Northern California about this, but our plans just sort of unfolded," Pritzker says. "We said things like, 'Wouldn't it be cool if we planted lavender here?' 'Yeah, but the lavender will attract bees.' 'OK, then we'll have a beekeeper so we can have our own honey, which would be cool.' 'And we can use that honey in our restaurant.'"

As his vision crystallized, Pritzker realized what he wanted: a summer camp without the rigid discipline; a family resort with great food and wine, plus a youthful esprit perfectly suited to the casual vibe of not only the valley, but also moneyed San Francisco and the South Bay. "I know this sounds corny, but I'm a kid at heart," Pritzker says. "And what we've got here is rompable country property that we plan to put to use."

Encouraging guests to explore is a well-established trend in hospitality that has given rise to an industry term—experiential travel—and a spate of luxury wine-country properties, such as Hotel Healdsburg, in Sonoma County, and Calistoga Ranch and Solage, in Napa Valley. But while Pritzker faces competition for this niche to the north, he has none in Carmel Valley itself, where the few other high-end ventures are either private communities (Clint Eastwood's Tehama and the ultra-exclusive Santa Lucia Preserve) or more narrowly focused, particularly Bernardus Lodge, whose spa and haute cuisine target couples traveling without kids. That

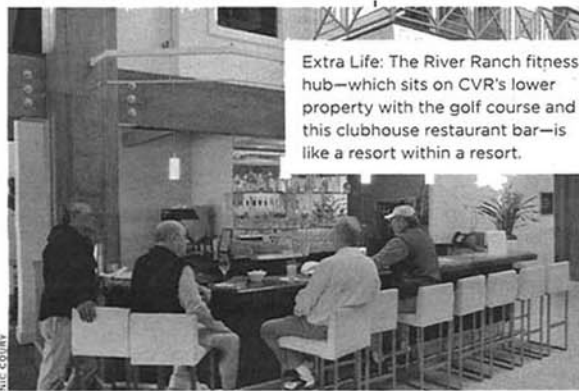
distinctiveness puts Pritzker in an enviable position, says Bill Baker, a branding consultant and the author of *Destination Branding for Small Cities*. "The valley isn't a blank slate," Baker says. "But through Carmel Valley Ranch, Pritzker has, in essence, a chance to define people's idea of what the valley is."

To hear some locals tell it, there are two Carmel Valleys: one rugged and authentic, the other gentrified and overstuffed. The less dogmatic view, though, finds many more valleys than those. Local demographics consist of a curious mishmash of old money and New Agers, hippies and hedge funders, celebrities and frontier-style eccentrics. The region comfortably makes room for both Tehama and Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, known for its kumbaya meditation retreats. Around the valley, you're as likely to come across a dusty rancher sipping fine wine in an upscale tasting room as you are to see a stockbroker sit-

continued on page 23

ting at the counter at the Wagon Wheel, a popular Western-themed breakfast-and-lunch spot.

The unofficial local census turns up such characters as saddle-shop owner Bob Mattson, a deaf, *Deadwood*-ian figure with a handlebar mustache who destroyed his own hearing by firing too many rifles as a kid; and a different sort of marksman, the Dutch-born Ben Pon, who represented his country in clay-pigeon shooting at the 1972 Summer Olympics. Pon, whose father was a prominent Volkswagen distributor and the designer of an early VW bus, also tried his hand at Formula One racing but crashed his single-seat Porsche in his first race. Photos of the accident hang today outside the lobby of Bernardus Lodge, which Pon built in 1999 and quickly elevated with Marinus, the one restaurant in the valley that registers as destination dining, and a winery that produces some of California's most



Extra Life: The River Ranch fitness hub—which sits on CVR's lower property with the golf course and this clubhouse restaurant bar—is like a resort within a resort.

acclaimed chardonnays.

"You can't really pigeonhole the character of the valley," says Michael Jones, owner of the Cachagua General Store, a landmark in the valley's eastern reaches. "What I find is, it's home to extremes of all kinds: right-wingers, left-wingers, libertarians, and everything in between. Even my most liberal friends out here own guns, and they'll shoot you if you step onto their property."

"Ultimately, this is a very low-key area, and I think that's why a guy like Eastwood likes it here," says Joe Rawitzer, a local winemaker who was born and raised in the valley. "People are friendly, but no one cares what your last name is or what you do for a living."

Around the valley, few people seem aware that Pritzker has Hyatt money, but by now most recognize his name and know what he's been up to at the ranch. That purchase, along with his Joie de Vivre investment, has brought Pritzker full circle, returning him after a 20-plus-year hiatus to the industry that shaped his early career. Born in Chicago, Pritzker joined the family business at 16. His first job was painting the boiler room of the Hyatt Regency O'Hare. Over the years, he has held myriad positions, including busboy and banquet manager, in multiple cities. In 1973, Pritzker moved to San Francisco, where he rose to a top post at Hyatt Hotels & Resorts. But, he says, the motive for his relocation was not professional. "Honestly? I

came because of the music scene. The Dead were here."

Pritzker's regular-guy bearing is unexpected for someone of his provenance. He's more apt to order beer than wine with dinner, and he's prone to dropping F-bombs in casual conversation, not as expletives but as a language crutch. ("I had this painting," he says of the quirky piece by his great-uncle that now hangs in the Carmel Valley Ranch lobby, "and I thought, 'What the fuck am I going to do with this?') Around the ranch, Pritzker prefers that his staffers address him as John. "If I could get my kids to call me Mr. Pritzker, that would be great," he says. (Pritzker is married and has three children, ages 26, 23, and 17.) "Otherwise, I don't need the 'Mr. Pritzker' thing."

For all of its benefits when he was growing up, Pritzker's famous surname also brought him a share of grief. When he was a teenager, one of his nonhotel jobs was at Lenny's Deli, a Chicago sandwich joint where he was working on the day news broke that his family had dropped many millions on the University of Chicago, a gift that gave rise to the Pritzker School of Medicine. Getting wind of the story, Lenny

barked at his employee, "Hey, Pritzker, when is your family going to fork over some of that dough to me?"

Ballbusting of that nature, Pritzker says, helped him to develop a thick skin, not to mention a sharp sense of humor. Earlier this year, knowing that the ranch's acting general manager would be giving a tour of the ranch to AOL cofounder Steve Case, Pritzker put the GM up to a prank. When Case came upon two ramshackle stables in the foothills—vestiges of the property's ranching past—the staffer told Case that Pritzker would use the stables for a horse-whispering program, in which guests and equines could commune. "As we're telling him this bullshit, Steve's face keeps getting redder and redder," Pritzker says. "He was clearly embarrassed for us, but he wasn't going to tell us that."

Case represents a high-tech market that Pritzker sees as crucial to the success of the ranch. His plan depends on both families and corporate clients, the Googles and Yahoos: young companies whose employees might appreciate such offerings as an *Iron Chef* competition that would double as a team-building exercise in the ranch's new "Adventure Kitchen." Guests checking in to one of the ranch's 139 renovated rooms (out with the stodgy golf-resort furnishings, in with hardwood floors and a more updated Restoration Hardware look) will be greeted with a gift box stocked with such items as a bird whistle, a

tree guide, and a s'mores recipe. Before entering the lobby, they'll pass a rope swing dangling from an oak tree—a Tom Sawyer-ish image that now serves as the new logo for the ranch.

The spirit Pritzker intends to invoke at the ranch is not only his own—playful and low-key—but also the valley's. His guests will be encouraged to drive farther down Carmel Valley Road, he says. "The twofor, for me, comes when we start attracting guests with enough disposable income to spend a few extra days down here to explore the area. We're not a casino. We're not trying to keep all the money on our property." Already, Pritzker is letting the valley spill onto the ranch. Tim Wood, the superb local chef who worked for years at Marinus, has been brought on to run the resort's new restaurants (see story, next page); Mark Marino, an organic farmer who oversaw harvests at nearby Earthbound Farm, presides over the property's organic garden; John Russo, a local beekeeper straight out of central casting (big beard, mellow demeanor), handles the apiary and the lavender fields.

For as long as anyone can remember, Carmel Valley has, in fact, been less crowded than Monterey, sunnier than Carmel, and cheaper than Pebble Beach. But it has lacked an anchor destination that properly defines the area—at once refined and funky, upscale and outdoorsy, sophisticated but with a sense of fun. Pritzker sees his ranch as that place, and he expects it to turn a profit within three years. But whatever happens, he says, he's in it for the long haul. "My DNA is Hyatt. We're not quick-flip artists."

In building his first hotel brand independent of his father's, created when John was a kid, Pritzker is also publicly defining himself for the first time. His family legacy is inescapable. Last summer, when the Carmel Valley Ranch fire sale went through, *Forbes* declared: "Jay Pritzker, the late Chicago financier, knew how to drive a bargain. Apparently, so does his son, John." But over time, and thanks to therapy ("Woody Allen's got nothing on me," Pritzker jokes), he has tackled the necessary questions and come to peace with them, Pritzker says. "Because Dad was a finance guy, he was proud of, albeit mystified by, my ability to deal with our guests' disparate personalities," he explains, breathing easily on his hike. "By dint of being an operator, I feel as though I've already made my bones and don't worry about ghosts of Pritzkers past watching my every move."

By now, the hike has taken him back over the ridgeline, toward the heart of the ranch. The sun is up and feisty, and the fog has broken over the valley. From high on the hill, Pritzker surveys the landscape. The vines are taking root, fresh soil has been laid in the organic garden, and purple patches of lavender are in bloom.

It's starting to look like the resort he wants it to be. ☒

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SNAPPY PATER, SUCCULENT FOOD

CHEF TIM WOOD REINVENTS COMFORT AT CARMEL VALLEY RANCH.

By Mark Anderson



Chef Special: Tim Wood wants his menu—which currently includes things like Jimmy’s cracked corn polenta, red wine oxtail sauce and buttermilk jalapeño dressing—to be a “a little spunky”; he’s eyeing his options with the “lounge” space (below) and a demo kitchen to achieve the same end.

He can do a money impression of everyone from Cal Stamenov—whom he helped make Bernardus’ Marinus restaurant the destination it is today—to local gardening semi-celeb Mark Marino. His fresh day boat scallops

(\$24)—kissed with citrus brown butter and paired with segments of satsuma mandarin—are tender heaven. His pain threshold under pressure is admirable: He broke his arm wrestling the day before his wedding and successfully kept it secret through the ceremony.

But Carmel Valley Ranch Executive Chef Tim Wood’s impressive—and atypical—tendencies don’t stop there. Perhaps most impressive among them: his candor.

As he took a couple of guests through a diaspora of deliciousness earlier this month—from an earthy beet salad to a spot-on short rib to a holiday-appropriate matzoh ball soup good enough to make Jewish foodies jealous—he shot straight in a way you wouldn’t expect.

“Cal came in for a visit and was ready to pound the table,” he said of an early staff service mistake. “Making this hap-

pen has been an adventure.”

Other unfiltered flavor from the stream of consciousness that accompanied our sequence of small plates: “I don’t think most people know how hard a start-up is”; “I want people to know what they’re eating—nothing too over-manipulated”; “I’m like the Christopher Walken of chefs.”

His easy openness also makes him a perfect poster boy for what the greater Carmel Valley Ranch wants to be: acces-

bed to be comfortable.”

Wood joined CVR earlier this year, and his food will work in much the same way he does—unassuming, rustic, straightforward, with plenty of personality.

Like the seared ahi Nicoise salad (\$15) with farm fresh egg, Savannah green beans, marinated olives and a white balsamic treatment, or golden chanterelle mushroom risotto (\$21) with butternut squash, pink lady apples and spicy arugula grown in CVR’s own gorgeous hilltop garden, just a quick golf-cart jaunt from the kitchen, down through the freshly planted vineyards.

Marino, late of Earthbound Farm, has signed on to manage the produce plot, which has delivered everything from purple peppers to bronze fennel to pink-and-white eggplant.

“Everything harvested from the garden goes to the kitchen,” Marino says. “I can’t grow enough stuff for the guy.”

As part of the ranch’s experiential-vacation mission, Marino says future plans call for him to teach guests about organic gardening. For now, he takes guests on a weekly tour, fielding horticulture questions and further connecting them to what they’ll eat during their stay.

Meanwhile Jamie Jarrard, late of



sible and fun, not pretentious or uptight.

“We have an opportunity to be playful,” he says. “Our goal is for people to be happy. Just like with the rooms, where we aren’t talking about 10 million thread counts. We just want the

Sierra Mar at Post Ranch, will provide potent pastry cheffing. With their help Wood will also steer two other CVR eateries, a golf club lunch spot and a terraced River Ranch cafe.

The Culinary Institute alum’s history here—Wood’s back from Carneros Inn in Napa after eight years at Bernardus—means he can tap top sources like a veteran.

“Tim is very well connected to the communities of Carmel Valley and the village,” Stamenov says.

Stamenov, who frequently traveled in Europe with Wood for Michelin-starred inspiration during their time together at Bernardus, also hits on something as crucial as the food stuff: Wood’s native steadiness, which will allow him to weather the unavoidable chaos of evolving such a sweeping project.

“Tim doesn’t stress out too much,” Stamenov says, “He’s pretty level.”

Given that calm, the fresh food and his natural frankness, it’s no stretch to expect Wood’s work to make quite an impression. ☒

Reserve a table at The Lodge Restaurant by calling 625-9500. The restaurant is open 11am-close daily.