

Smart meetings

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Back to the Ranch

By Carolyn Koenig

If you remember Carmel Valley Ranch as a staid, clubby resort, it's time to re-think your perception. Today, this gorgeous, 500-acre property tucked into its namesake Northern California locale is fresh, reimagined and playful.

An infusion of \$35 million by owner John Pritzker (of Geolo Capital and a member of the Hyatt family) provided the wherewithal to renovate and upgrade. But it was his vision that transformed the property into an elegant yet unpretentious retreat.

Nowhere is this vision so dramatically evident than in the kitchen. With Executive Chef Tim Wood at the helm, the Lodge Restaurant offers up what he calls "rustic but sophisticated" cuisine—using the same techniques you'd find in high-end restaurants and hotels, but "simplifying them a bit."

Simplifying, yes, but also honoring the ingredients. Rather than "trying to wow you with our tablecloth, we focus more on the ingredients that hit the plate and where they're coming from," he says.

The personable chef—who's delighted to come out of the kitchen and speak to your guests—has spent many years not only learning his craft, but also creating relationships with the best sources for his farm-to-table cuisine.

As a child in upstate New York, Wood learned at the family table to appreciate what a good roasted chicken tasted like—with asparagus and tomatoes from their garden. A stint in the Catskills working for a mentor in a German restaurant taught him the meaning of hospitality: thinking ahead for guests' convenience and pleasure, a philosophy that's ingrained in all elements of the reinvigorated resort.

Wood, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, took a turn at the Rainbow Room, Butterfield 81 and other East Coast restaurants before coming to California, where he honed his personal, "home-style kind of cooking."

During his tenure at Bernardus, another noted Carmel Valley property, he developed a continuing network of local purveyors for everything from tomatoes and mushrooms to tuna and California sea bass. Among his favorites is Dick Swank, of Swank Farms: "Whatever Dick grows, we cook," he says. "I know their integrity." Also, fisherman Jerry Wetle, from All American Sportfishing, a family-owned business: "He's nuttier about fish than I am about food," Wood says with a laugh.

Wood folds that appreciation of ingredients and their sources into his luscious menus, including the three-course meal he developed for *Smart Meetings* readers (right), which he can offer for up to about 200 guests on-property. (The same ingredients used in the restaurant are used for catering, by the way.) "In the winter, lettuces can get a little funky," he says, so he likes to use chicories and some heartier greens in his salads. For the short ribs, he "builds up levels of flavors, and the short ribs act like a sponge and soak up the cooking flavors." For the dessert, he worked with pastry chef Jamie Jarrard, who recently joined the team from the Post Ranch Inn. "We cook similar—not fussy," he says. "Cooking from within, not from a [cookbook]. She, too, uses some traditional techniques and puts an extra spin on them."

What's the playful part of the resort for Wood? The property now features the Adventure Kitchen, where guests can participate in interactive culinary



Smart Meetings Menu

Executive Chef Tim Wood
Carmel Valley Ranch, Calif.

First Course

Carmel Valley Ranch Winter Chicory Salad
House-Smoked Sonoma Duck Breast, Marin Farms Blue Cheese
and Pomegranate Vinaigrette

Second Course

Naturally Raised Beef Short Rib
Big Sur Chanterelle Mushrooms, Oven-Roasted Winter Root
Vegetables, Cabernet Jus

Third Course

Chocolate and Peppermint Semifreddo
with Thin Mint Cookies and Dark Chocolate Sauce



classes (or team-building, Iron Chef-type competitions) that begin by picking produce in the resort's organic garden and progress to its specially equipped kitchen. "When you get people together and get them to cook, they just light up and start right in," he says.