

TABLE TALK

Lodge at Carmel Valley Ranch almost has it

Food stops short of great, but restaurant is a people-watching paradise

By **Esme Noir**
montereyheraldfood@gmail.com

“Keep going on this road until you pass under the wooden bridge and then turn right,” said the gatekeeper. A winding road ascended the hill, offering stunning views of canyon and mountains. The Noirs were off to the Lodge Restaurant at Carmel Valley Ranch.

Several pitfalls await first-timers, not the least of which are finding the Lodge and then locating the restaurant within. Carmel Valley Ranch employs a minimalist approach to signage.

Eventually we found ourselves in the spacious lobby, luxurious and serene, with a stone fireplace and modernist chandeliers. The hostess seated us in a lively informal dining area adjacent to the Lodge’s wrap-around bar, overlooking a pristine pool (complete with bikini-clad bathers) and a charming grove of oak trees. Mr. Noir later suggested that I really should purchase a bikini.

It was only after we began sipping our traditional half bottle of Schramsberg Blanc de Blanc (pricey at \$44) that the third member of our party pointed out a more elegant dining area beyond the bar. This room, more linen tablecloths than bare wood and woven placemats, seemed fitting for our night on the town (and the prices on the menu). A request to move was met with consternation and the explanation that one must request the “back room” when making a reservation. At no time did the back room appear to be more than partially filled. At least we were assured that our identity as restaurant reviewers had not been discovered.

As it turned out, we thoroughly enjoyed our station by the bar. A basket of good focaccia bread accompanied by herb butter appeared post haste, our server was welcoming, and the people-watching was extraordinary. The place was a veritable playground for escapees from the pages of Town & Country, intriguingly mismatched couples, and families with preternaturally well-behaved children. These, as Mr. Noir put it so aptly, were “elsewherians.”

We were eager to peruse the offerings of executive chef Tim Wood, formerly of Marinus and Napa’s Carneros Inn. An amuse bouche of

THE LODGE RESTAURANT AT CARMEL VALLEY RANCH

Address: One Old Ranch Road, Carmel Valley
Hours: 7 a.m. to 11 p.m.
Contact: 625-9500, www.carmelvalleyranch.com/dining/carmel-dining

crostini with leek puree and radish amused our bouches. The a la carte menu was varied, with many tempting dishes. Much of the produce is grown on site, and the family trees of the meats were described in detail. Entrees ranged from \$27 (English pea risotto) to \$42 (Big Sur rock cod and cockles). A more modest bar menu is available, though we had to ask for it after noting its presence at other tables.

The wine list is heavy on chardonnay, cabernet and pinot from Monterey County and adjacent California wine areas. Markups approach three times retail, though selections are available at all price points. Our server did his best to guide us, but a sommelier would have been helpful. At \$25, the corkage is what we have come to expect (albeit begrudgingly) from local high-end restaurants.

Our first selection, Brewer Clifton Pinot Noir (\$84), a mouthful in the New World style, arrived just in time for our appetizers: braised royal trumpet mushroom pizza (\$17), a cup of cauliflower soup (\$5) and Swank Farms organic beet salad (\$14).

To my surprise, the pizza was the standout dish of the evening. Though clearly of the thin-crust persuasion, this was substantial enough to satisfy. The crust was just crisp enough, the mushrooms succulent. A drizzle of truffle oil added richness, and a sprinkling of arugula lent color and a dash of bitterness.

Cauliflower soup (no cream) was deceptively rich and creamy, also with an attractive swirl of truffle oil.

The beet salad, however, was a disappointment. I am quite the beet salad maven, and this one did not pass muster. Its chunks of red beets were fine, but pale yellow beets were mushy. I don’t know whether they were long of tooth or just overcooked, but someone in the kitchen fell down on the job.

With dinner proceeding at a leisurely pace, we could



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The braised royal trumpet mushroom pizza (\$17) was the surprise standout dish of the evening.

see that another bottle of wine was obligatory. Mr. Noir scrutinized the wine list and came up with what turned out to be an amazing find: a bottle of 1994 Cote Rotie Seigneur de Maugiron (a bargain at \$70), which, alas was their last bottle. We felt like the cat who swallowed the canary.

To accompany the Cote Rotie (at this point wine had taken center stage) I chose Mary’s free-range chicken breast, Pitman Family farm (\$27). A generous helping of roast chicken breast and wing rested atop homey polenta and was surrounded by cauliflower and a tasty brown sauce. I loved the soft, creamy polenta. The chicken was perfectly pleasant, crisp of skin, but somehow good rather than great. I couldn’t help comparing it to other (nameless) roast chickens I have known.

Our friend chose the slow-braised Berkshire pork shoulder “bacon and eggs” with white bean ragu, panc-

etta and CVR hen house egg (\$32). What meat-eater could resist? I had a taste of the pork, tender and good, with a crisp cube of pancetta. Like the chicken, it was fine but short of fantastic.

Mr. Noir opted for double cut pork chops (\$32). Two thick chops, nicely browned, were served with roasted potatoes and winter vegetables. A subtle apple-based sauce provided just the right balance between savory and sweet. He thoroughly enjoyed this comforting combination, a suitable companion for the scrumptious Northern Rhone.

We ended up having a delightful evening despite the administrative glitches and our impression that the food was better in concept than in execution. Service was friendly and attentive, the wine lovely. The people-watching was out of this world and the vibe was fun. If only the kitchen could add a dash of that je-ne-sais-quoi, we’d be back in a trice.

ON NUTRITION

New study complicates the word on fat

My doc was pleased that my blood tests had improved.

“Cholesterol’s down,” he reassured me.

Yay. Trying to avoid excess saturated fat in my diet paid off.

Then he handed me a copy — hot off the press — of a report in the Annals of Internal Medicine that appears to question that choice. A review of the association between different types of fats and coronary (heart) disease concluded: “Current evidence does not clearly support cardiovascular guidelines that encourage high consumption of polyunsaturated fatty acids and low consumption of saturated fats.”

Translation: This study found no clear proof that cutting back on my saturated fat intake and increasing my intake of polyunsaturated fats will lower my risk for heart disease.

My first reaction was, Yippee. I think I’ll go buy that yummy-tasting high saturated fat yogurt I usually avoid.

My second reaction was, Maybe I need to get more information.

This current report is actually a review of several studies, most of which are “observational” — considered a poor source of information on the effects of dietary changes. Moreover, observational studies give us clues to what we need to study further.

And to its credit, this study also looked at real experiments on real people in randomized controlled trials.

So what’s the problem? The way I understand it, we have ample evidence that replacing saturated fats in the diet with those that are more unsaturated reduces the “bad” LDL cholesterol in our blood. And lowering LDL lowers our risk factor for heart disease.

These researchers found no positive proof,



Barbara Quinn

however, that just eating less saturated fat (or eating more polyunsaturated fat) will cut our risk for heart disease.

Which is enough to fuel the Internet with comments like, “Don’t read anything written by food experts.”

To which I reply, I’d much rather trust a trained pilot to guide me to my destination than the guy in the back of the plane complaining about the turbulence.

So here’s what experts generally agree on:

Trans fats — more than saturated fat — are detrimental to heart health. That’s why the Food and Drug Administration recommends we phase trans fats out of our food supply.

There are several types of saturated fat — some more detrimental than others — which complicates studies of this type even more.

Eating patterns that include a wide variety of plant-based foods — from vegetables to fruit to whole grains to beans to nuts — have shown over and over again to protect against heart disease, obesity and type 2 diabetes. This “whole diet approach” is naturally lower in saturated fat and shows benefits “not from one specific element, but from the sum of its parts,” according to Jeremy Pearson, associate medical director of the British Medical Journal who helped fund this research.

“This study does not tell us that saturated fat is good for us,” says Pearson. “It only tells us that saturated fat may not be as damaging as we thought.”

Personally, I know the benefits when I improve the overall quality of my diet. And even if there is no absolute proof that the saturated fat in that yummy-tasting yogurt will give me heart disease, I need those extra fat calories like I need another controversial diet study.

Grub

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VESUVIO, CARMEL» When the weather cooperates, there is no better happy hour perch than on the rooftop of this popular hangout. The daily happy hour runs from 4-6 p.m., with \$5 cocktails and half-price bar menu, including the Peninsula’s best arancini, Pepe’s famous garlic bread, pizza, ribs and more.

BAYONET GRILL, BAYONET & BLACK HORSE GOLF COURSES, SEASIDE» This under-rated spot scores above par on both food and view. Join the fun each Friday from 3-7 p.m. for \$3 well drinks, \$3 glasses of local wine and \$2 drafts. Get a half-pound burger for \$6, and a slew of \$5 appetizers, including its famous Inferno Hot Wings.

PETER B’S BREWPUB, PORTOLA HOTEL & SPA, MONTEREY» This hangout features quality craft brews made in-house, but the happy hour dishes up quality and value daily from 4-6:30 p.m. Brews are \$4, margaritas \$3 and appetizers start at \$3. Don’t forget Taco Thursday, when the kitchen churns out hundreds of one-buck tacos. **HULA’S ISLAND GRILL, MONTEREY»** Bring a handful of \$5 bills and you’ll be happy here from 4-6 p.m. Sunday and Monday and 2-6 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday. (Tiki Tuesdays happy hour is 2 p.m. to closing.) Specialty Tiki Cocktails (try the Painkiller) and top-shelf wines are priced at \$5, along with a hefty list of pu-

pus, including crispy coconut shrimp rolls and Hawaiian ceviche.

POINT PINOS GRILL, PACIFIC GROVE GOLF LINKS, PACIFIC GROVE» As the days get longer the kitchen stays open for dinner, and the weekday happy hour rates as one of the best. From 4-6 p.m. enjoy \$3 draft beers and \$5 glasses of wine. Five bucks will also get you a mess of pardon peppers, a cup of chili, chicken quesadillas and more.

CIBO RISTORANTE ITALIANO, MONTEREY» This nightly happy hour from 4-7 p.m. (bar only) features specials on Italian favorites such as roasted tomato bruschetta (\$3), polenta caprese (\$3), meatball sliders (\$5), panino with mozzarella and pesto (\$7) and more. Well drinks and house wines check in at \$3. **ESTEBAN, CASA MUNRAS HOTEL, MONTEREY»** The “feliz hora” at this lively spot runs daily from 5-6:30 p.m. and includes half-price pintxos (Spanish bar snacks) and \$5 sangria, draft beer, house wine and mojitos. **SCHOONERS BAR, MONTEREY PLAZA, CANNERY ROW»** Absorb the killer views during Social Hour (weekdays 4-6 p.m.), with Galley Bites (Kobe sliders, chicken wings, shrimp pizza and more) all priced at \$5. On Fridays find \$1.50 oysters.

MONTEREY COOKHOUSE, MONTEREY» The daily happy hour (4-6 p.m.) includes the amazing burger-and-a-beer deal for 10 bucks. Find starters for as low as \$3, with calamari, ribs and more for \$5. **JACKS LOUNGE, PORTOLA**

HOTEL, MONTEREY» This daily happy hour (4-6 p.m.) includes free valet parking, half off cheese plate (\$7), and half off all wines by the glass, not just house wines.

Impressive debut for GourmetFest

The food festival season kicked off in grand style last week with David Fink dusting off the blueprint for the mother of all culinary events, the now-defunct Masters of Food and Wine, and uncorking the Carmel GourmetFest in grand style.

In what appeared to be a shot over the bow of Coastal Luxury Management, Fink brought in the prestigious European brand Relais & Chateau to underwrite the event, which took place in and around Carmel. CLM’s Pebble Beach Food and Wine rolls out its own red carpet in less than two weeks, and will be hard-pressed to match the understated elegance and class of the more intimate GourmetFest.

Fink and Co. nailed it, matching the mood and cachet of Carmel, and any hitches went unseen.

Pebble Beach Food and Wine is just a different animal, more voracious certainly, and exotic — and it attracts a different crowd. That means there is certainly room for both, but perhaps with more space in between on our already crowded calendar.

There are still tickets available for some events at the 7th annual Pebble Beach event (April 10-13) that attracts 30 world-class chefs and 200 wineries. For more information, visit www.pb主w.com.

Monterey Recreation Summer/Fall 2014 Activities



Register now! It’s time to play!

Registration Begins

Wednesday, April 2

Open Registration

April 2-November 26, 2014

Monday-Friday, 8:00am-4:0pm

Register at:

Monterey Recreation Administration Office

546 Dutra St., Monterey

or online at: www.monterey.org/rec



Monterey Sports Center
Registration

BEGINS: WEDNESDAY, APRIL 2 at 5:30am

Call: 646-3730

www.monterey.org/sportscenter



Going Green!

Monterey Recreation has published and distributed fewer Activity Guides this season in order to save paper, trees and money. We encourage everyone to go online to www.monterey.org/rec to access our online guide and to register using Rec Online. Registering online is eco-friendly — you save gas, reduce CO2 emissions, save time and save paper. Plus, you have the added convenience of registering at any time.

Guides may also be picked up at the Monterey Recreation Administration Office, Monterey Sports Center, Hilltop Park Center, Monterey Youth Center, Scholze Park Center, Casanova Oak Knoll Park Center and Monterey Public Library.

Call 646-3866 for more information.
www.monterey.org/rec