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Geranium, Copenhagen, Denmark



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MARTIN DYRLBY MADSEN; EVAN SUNG (2); MARIE HENNECHART; ALANNA HALE (2)

The Restaurant at Meadowood, St. Helena, Calif.

The Restaurant at Meadowood

Creating a synergy of food and wine in Napa Valley • By Tim Fish

The word “holistic” is not often associated with a luxury resort, but that’s exactly the connection between the Restaurant at Meadowood and Napa Valley. The food, the wine and the cultures are harmoniously entwined, creating a dining experience that’s ambitious and distinctly Napan.

H. William Harlan, creator of cult Cabernet Harlan Estate, is the managing partner of Meadowood, so the focus should come as no surprise. But the restaurant had a sleepy reputation until it closed for a four-year hiatus. When it reopened in 2006, Harlan wanted a more dynamic dining room, all part of the 250-acre estate’s \$60 million renovation. He hired Nathaniel Dorn as restaurant director to set the change in motion.

“I had something in mind 10 years ago,” Dorn says. “And now to see it coming to fruition is very satisfying.”

The restaurant’s wine list was a crucial element in the new vision. Dorn built the list from scratch, systematically compiling its current 2,250 selections.

Knowing that diners would expect an upscale Napa experience, Dorn began knocking on the doors of local vintners with the goal of building verticals. He also wanted to learn the stories behind the wineries and the wines. “I don’t want to just sell the wines, I want to talk about the history as well,” he says.

The collection of Napa verticals is impressive. Inglenook Cabernet Sauvignons go back to 1946, Beaulieu Vineyard Georges de Latour Cabernets date to 1960, and Dunn Howell Mountain and Mondavi Reserve Cabernets begin with 1979. The list is also strong in California Chardonnay and Pinot Noir; altogether, the Golden State represents about 60 percent of the list.

But the approach is hardly provincial. Burgundy is well-represented with top producers. There is a small but admirable list of vintage Bordeaux and thoughtfully selected highlights from Germany and Italy. A notable list of half-bottles provides additional flexibility. So does a wide range of wines by the glass, with recent offerings including Krug Grande Cuvée (\$65) and Seavy Cabernet Sauvignon Napa Valley 1998 (\$85).

Dorn and wine director Victoria Kulinich continue to expand the cellar’s holdings, focusing particularly on Europe and the New World beyond California. “I feel like we’re 60 percent there,” Dorn says.

Building an impressive wine list is one thing, but finding synergy with chef Christopher Kostow’s cuisine, not to mention the preferences of individual diners, is what it’s all about for Dorn, Kulinich and sommelier Martin Winters. “We want to give the food more of the stage,” Kulinich says.

Since joining the restaurant in 2008, Kostow has earned a reputation for creating dishes that are artful and delicately complex. He

depends extensively on the restaurant’s 3-acre garden; vegetables, herbs and fruit, typically picked the day they are served, bring a remarkable freshness and purity to the dishes. Savory asparagus custard with miner’s lettuce and caviar tastes like spring. The kitchen also has an efficient program to dry and preserve the garden bounty.

Everything about the experience is intimate. There are only 12 tables in the dining room, which has a tall, rafted ceiling and is done in dark hues. Prices are rarefied too: The prix fixe menu costs \$330, service charge included, and the average wine price is nearly \$400 per bottle, Kulinich says.

Depending on the kitchen’s aspirations that day, 10 to 12 courses are offered, but a menu isn’t presented until after the meal, and it resembles a haiku more than a detailed description. That approach can be puzzling at first, particularly as guests are presented with the wine list without a menu, but that’s where Dorn and his team come in.

About 60 percent of guests rely on a wine-pairing option, which offers five glasses of wines (for an approximate \$225 premium), about 5 ounces each, that can be savored over several courses. The philosophy on wine pairing is unfussy and is more about complementing the intensity of flavors than finding the classic match for each course.

“You’re really putting yourself in the care of the staff and the chef,” Dorn says. “It’s all about building a relationship. Allow us to tailor the experience for you.” □



From left: restaurant director Nathaniel Dorn, wine director Victoria Kulinich and chef Christopher Kostow

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