

Spa at Cavallo Point Lodge is a lush comfort zone

Leslie Harlib

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Scents of salty bay and pungent eucalyptus fill the air at Fort Baker in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, where the Healing Arts Center and Spa at Cavallo Point Lodge, open since July 1, is still something of a secret.

There's an outdoor basking pool heated to 102 degrees. Less a swimming pool than a giant hot tub, it has no jets. In its calm waters, guests float quietly, meditatively. Though the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge (with its clogged arteries of traffic) are visible from part of the spa's grounds, you feel a million miles away.

Plump chairs and cushioned lounges ring the basking pool or are spread out on the lawn, where breathing the sweetness of local herbs planted everywhere, such as lavender and Mexican sage, adds to the serenity.

The main spa building, where the locker and treatment rooms are located, is as filled with light as a contemporary art museum. Its sweeps of wooden beams are contrasted by copper wall panels and fathoms of windows that reflect a steadily blazing gas fire, welcoming even on a hot day. The gray, green and straw-gold color scheme makes the inside feel like an extension of the Marin Headlands hills that rise up at sharp angles from the edge of Cavallo Point Lodge's buildings and lawns, cupping the spa like a giant, rough-hewn hand.

"We're trying to create a retreat that's out of the ordinary," said Jenny Helling, the spa's director. "Something that positions us as unique. Our

philosophy here, and our mission statement, is to return to basics, return to nature and return to self."

They're doing a good job. The new spa offers a range of classic herbal wraps, salt scrubs, a menu of massage and facials, a deep soaking tub filled with herb broth in which I steeped as if I were a human tea bag. All treatments are available for both men and women.

But it also offers consultations such as I've rarely see on a spa menu. Under a section called "Healing Arts," there are one-hour to 90-minute private sessions on how to take control of your weight, stop smoking, deal with addiction behavior, free yourself from anxiety, learn how to sleep more effectively, boost your immune system, even find your real age. If you were a high-end sports car, the spa at Cavallo Point Lodge could be considered the ultimate garage for an overall tuneup.

"We're trying to do maintenance here," said Katie Delwiche, a trained herbalist on the spa staff. Book time with her and she'll take an hour-long personal history - just for starters - to determine what herbs are best to heal any number of physical ailments, from muscular to digestive to sexual.

"We're trying to get people on track with their health. Herbs can be really effective in shifting things. What I do is straightforward, I don't get too woo-woo," she smiled.

Going through consultations with Delwiche or with staff nutritionist Sandy Richards (who also teaches at College of Marin), it becomes clear that Cavallo Point Lodge spa can be as much a learning center as an indulgence.

"I have many clients who knock themselves out every day. They come to me to get clarity on what they need to do for themselves in terms of how they

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eat," Richards said. "Very few spas that I know of have a nutritionist. I think it's needed, because people are getting way too confused by massive amounts of information out there on what to eat and a lot of it is conflicting."

There's not much chance for conflict about what to eat at the spa's Tea Bar. Light meals here include seasonal salads such as heirloom tomato or melon (\$7), a couple of sandwiches on house-baked bread with local organic meats and vegetables (\$8), rejuvenating drinks. A Fire Wellness Shot (\$5), a two-ounce glass of fresh lemon juice spiked with oil of wild oregano and other tonics, tasted like a lemon crossed with the engine fluid from a Ferrari. I felt energized within a minute of downing it. I loved the raw chocolate shake and vanilla vegan shake (\$8) based on almond or soy milk and laced with protein and immunity-boosting powders. These tongue-coating, mildly sweet concoctions made dessert another word for health opportunity.

"Everything we serve is made in-house at the restaurant kitchen and brought to the Tea Bar fresh daily," explained Joan Amaral, a smiling, dark-haired young woman who has a demeanor as calm as the resort spa's omnipresent new age music.

What I was most impressed with about the new spa is its accessibility. Local residents are welcome to book one treatment (they range in price from \$140 to \$260) and spend as much time as they like during that day to enjoy the facilities. You can have lunch or a snack in the Tea Bar, lounge by the pool, use the gender-separate locker room facilities, which include jetted hot tubs, herbal sauna and steam rooms, sit in the lobby to read, or even color in the sophisticated coloring books piled in baskets and available for anyone to scribble in. If you're there long enough, you may end up having a drink and snack in Farley's Bar or Murray Circle Restaurant, just one building away.

"We hope we'll do well in this down-turned economy," Helling said. "Part of getting through these tough times is learning how to care for yourself to deal with the stress of what's happening. It's important to come to a place like this, that's warm, welcoming and peaceful."

IF YOU PAMPER YOURSELF

-- What: The Healing Arts Center and Spa at Cavallo Point Lodge

-- Where: 1563 Seidler Drive, Fort Baker, Sausalito

-- Hours: 8:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. weekdays; 8:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. weekends

-- Treatments: Massages, scrubs, wraps, soaks and consultations

-- Prices: \$140 to \$260; packages available for groups

-- Information: 339-4767, www.cavallopoint.com ; e-mail spa@cavallopoint.com

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