

Dining Out: Murray Circle, the best restaurant in Marin

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Oh my, Murray Circle. I've never come right out and said a two-month old establishment was the best restaurant in Marin County - until now.

I had a clue, though, that we were in for something extraordinary when Cavallo Point, the new eco-friendly upscale lodge at Fort Baker on the water in Sausalito, launched its soft-opening events in May.

One Friday night when the lodge was not yet open to the public, although Murray Circle and the more informal Farley Bar had been running all of a week or so, I hung out at Farley Bar and had a light meal of a grass-fed beef burger (\$16). This was an inch-and-a-half thick pad of dripping juicy meat (I ordered it rare) on a tender house-made bun so shiny with glaze it reflected the ceiling lights. The pickled seasonal vegetables with it were just right, as were crisp shoestring fries with true potato flavor. It was clear that quality was a priority here.

A week or so later I went to Murray Circle to sample the buffet breakfast (\$20). It included a selection of exceptional house-made pastries by pastry/dessert chef Ethan Howard, including the best croissant and pain au chocolat I've had outside Paris, assorted jams and marmalades all made from scratch, house-made granola as well as sausage, squares of a tender vegetable quiche, an assorted fruit platter so colorful with berries that it looked like an edible still life, and all the excellent coffee I could drink. For the price, a high-end breakfast doesn't get any better than this.

I had dinner at Murray Circle with three

companions who ranged from sophisticated about food and wine to downright curmudgeonly about even the slightest off detail in a restaurant, and we were all wowed by our meal. Two in my party immediately made reservations for their next visit as we were paying our bill.

So Murray Circle - What to say about an experience that so impressed me?

I'll shoot from the hip and say the main reason I loved it was because it played directly to my values about aesthetics as well as eating. My idea of restaurant heaven includes sumptuous seating, fireplaces, soothing earth tones in golds, beiges, greens and ochres, and soft but not dim lighting. If a view of San Francisco Bay and grass-covered hills comes with this, so much the better. I value comfort over hip. I love mellow background jazz or classical music, graceful and only detectable if you decide to pay attention.

All of this characterizes Murray Circle's huge dining room, which has a couple of smaller seating areas off to the sides. Go for one of these when you make your reservations. That's where you'll find the quietest atmosphere and best views.

As for cuisine, I'm devoted to buying and cooking seasonal and local ingredients, which I do year-round. To find a restaurant that is also committed to this but with the talents of executive chef Joseph Humphrey (he earned two Michelin stars during his tenure at Meadowood Resort in St. Helena) behind the menu is like being an apprentice magician who finally gets to experience the magic of the lord high sorcerer - or in this case, sourcerer - himself.

That said, Murray Circle is not for everyone. Folks who are happiest with a big plate brimming over with filling, solid food will not like Murray Circle. They might find the concept effete. After all, this is a

restaurant where commitment to quality ingredients is so high, the menu lists the name of the Half Moon Bay fishing boat that caught the astonishingly sweet Dungeness crab we enjoyed. It turned up as a tiny island of cool, pure seafood cake surrounded by a bubbling seafood bisque the color of cream-tinged lobster shells and tinged with kaffir lime (\$13).

I can't imagine anyone not lusting for the breads, also baked in-house by Humphrey. There were three - a sourdough slice, a mini ciabatta and an extraordinary roll striated with black seaweed that was the hit of the night. We could have made a meal just of a couple of bread baskets, plenty of sweet butter and a vegetable dish or two.

The menu is broken down into fruits and vegetables, fish and shellfish, and meats and poultry rather than small or large plates. Every plate is smallish. I think it's ideal for sharing, so everyone gets a bite or two of each dish. You won't be full, but you won't be hungry, either.

Heartier eaters could opt for the nightly chef's tasting menu (\$75), which might include the inventive and pretty six eggs six ways: over-easy quail egg on a little egg-enriched potato pancake; hard boiled and soft-boiled partridge egg; and pheasant eggs stuffed with black or red caviar.

Sweet Iacopi English peas from Half Moon Bay turned up in a cool, essence-of-vegetable green gazpacho (\$13) brightened with the unexpected tang and crunch of citrus-fennel granita.

Red and yellow heirloom tomatoes from Capay Organics in Yolo County were layered with thin slices of yellow watermelon and fresh slivered basil (\$13) in a dish so aromatic and savory with summer flavors that we were stunned.

Beautifully sourced, though just a little less

dramatic, was a combination of foraged wild porcinis from Mt. Shasta with baby leeks, crumbles of pepato sheep's milk cheese and a hint of pecans (\$12).

A small chunk of line-caught white sea bass from Moro Bay (\$14) was grilled and topped with a whole charred baby squid that was splayed out atop the fish like an edible exhibit in a seafood museum. Even better - in fact, one of the most deliciously simple pieces of fish I've ever eaten - was a little hunk of wild sturgeon from Washington state, grilled over wood and teamed with fresh morels in a hint of cream and smoked bacon that played perfectly off the succulent, juicy fish (\$18).

One whole roasted quail from Wolfe Ranch in Vacaville (\$18) accompanied a slick of burgundy-colored romesco sauce based on darkly roasted peppers, broccoli di cicco and dry cured olives. It was one of the more robust versions of quail I've eaten.

Grass-fed lamb shoulder from Petaluma was served in coin-sized rare rounds that contrasted with fresh grilled apricots, whiskey sauce and a nasturtium blossom (\$21).

Yes, the prices are low for such bounty. But the portions, as I said, are small. You'd need at least three dishes to fill up, more if you're only ordering vegetable plates.

Desserts (all \$9) are an absolute must. I've rarely eaten better anywhere in California.

When a hot butterscotch souffle arrived, steaming in an individual ramekin and teamed with a little pad of butterscotch blondie under a scoop of house-made vanilla ice cream, the mix of textures and temperatures- soft, velvety, smooth, chewy, hot, icy - was so satisfying I called it "the sex course."



Hot triangles of malted waffle as light as clouds with treads and crust, were served with chunks of sauteed bananas, caramelized macadamia nuts and coconut sorbet. It redefined what a great waffle can be, and they ain't just for breakfast.

Four fresh sauteed bing cherries, a shard of puff pastry, a shortbread cookie topped with almond financier and a knob of almond ice cream, came together as the ultimate deconstructed cherry pie.

A caramel cream brulee was the epitome of all that we dream of when it comes to burnt sugar and cream.

The least successful, to my surprise, was a square of bittersweet espresso cake that was wonderfully creamy but had an odd flavor, its chocolate notes thrown off by too much coffee.

Service still needs help. The staff for the most part was friendly but not too familiar, yet seemingly inexperienced enough to need training. For instance, we'd brought a bottle of our own red wine and planned to order a white from the impressive multipage book of a wine list that features a large selection of organic as well as biodynamic wines from around the world. We should have been asked if we wanted to open our bottle immediately. It was ignored until we asked. There was a fair lag from the time we asked for our bill to the time we paid it. But these are small things and I'd guess will be corrected over time.

The experience was wonderful. Because the menu changes so regularly, it's an incentive to keep on coming back and exploring Humphrey's seasonal ideas. I can't wait for my next adventure there.

REVIEW

Murray Circle at Cavallo Point Lodge

Address: 602 Murray Circle (at Fort Baker), Sausalito

Phone: 339-4750

Web site: www.cavallopoint.com

Cuisine: Seasonal California, ingredients-driven

Service: Young, enthusiastic, still needs more training

Noise level: Quiet, well-modulated

Recommended dishes: Seasonal menu changes; may be sweet pea ravioli with pistachio emulsion, baby carrots, tarragon; six kinds of eggs six ways; wild Columbia River sturgeon with smoked bacon and creamy morels; malted waffles with roasted bananas, coconut sorbet, and candied macadamia nuts; hot butterscotch souffle with butterscotch blondie and vanilla ice cream.

Liquor selection: Full bar and multipage, detailed wine list, many biodynamically grown or organic

Corkage: \$25 for one bottle; two-bottle limit; fee will be waived for every bottle purchased off the list

Heart-healthy and vegetarian selections: Many

Parking: Free lots on site and valet

Wheelchair access: Yes

Hours: Buffet breakfast 7 to 10 a.m. daily; Brunch 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. weekends; lunch 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. weekdays; dinner 5:30 to 10 p.m. Sundays to Thursdays; until 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. Farley Bar, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sundays to Thursdays, until midnight Fridays and Saturdays.

Credit cards: All major cards



Summary: Murray Circle features dramatic views of water and hills out huge windows. It has a low-key yet sumptuous decor bolstered by spectacular, seasonally driven menus created by executive chef Joseph Humphrey and his staff. Open since May, this new upscale restaurant is an out-and-out wow, to my taste Marin's best at this point in time.

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