

## RESTAURANT REVIEW

# With views of Golden Gate and flawless food, Sausalito's Murray Circle a 4-star treat

## Food at new resort eatery ranks 4 stars

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FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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The Golden Gate was well guarded in days gone by. Cannon emplacements still flank the entrance to San Francisco Bay on either side of the water. The Presidio dominates the south shore and Fort Baker, an Army post built a century ago, keeps watch over the north shore just east of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Fort Baker looks pretty much like it did in 1908. Except now the puttees and barking sergeants have been replaced by the sensational comforts of civilian life, as the facility has morphed into Cavallo Point Lodge. It includes dozens of historic and contemporary guest rooms, a health spa and tea lounge, culinary school, yacht basin, Farley Bar (the lounge features the late Phil Frank's original "Farley" comic strips), and Murray Circle, its restaurant. Cavallo Point is set like a gem in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and its military history is echoed today by a nearby Coast Guard station.

The views from almost everywhere on the property are incomparable: You see the magnificent structure of the bridge and across the water, the skyline of San Francisco that at night tips the waves with wriggling strings of light.

Murray Circle — so named for the road that circumscribes the old parade grounds around which the historic military buildings are arrayed — lured Joseph Humphrey away from Meadowood Resort in St. Helena to handle executive chef duties. The restaurant could hardly have chosen better, as Humphrey earned two well-deserved

Michelin stars at Meadowood.

At Murray Circle he has created a menu that fully suits the four-star quality of the setting. The provenance of main ingredients is always given, from the farm where it was grown to the fishing vessel that brought it to land.

Portions are small — larger than tapas but smaller than full plates. The idea is that for the price of one large entrée, you get two smaller ones with double the intrigue.

While every one of Humphrey's creations is flawlessly executed, the front-of-house staff could use a little of that old military discipline.

As we were seated, the hostess asked our party of four men and three women, "How are you guys tonight?" That greeting may fly at TGI Friday's but isn't really appropriate at a fine restaurant.

Less excusable was the waiter's reaction to our concern about the jalapeños used in a Dungeness crab dish, since the Food and Drug Administration had just issued warnings that jalapeños were implicated in a national outbreak of salmonella. "All our ingredients are locally sourced," he sniffed. "Jalapeños are ripe already in Marin?" one of our party asked. "You want me to bring out the bag?" he said curtly, then left.

Although the restaurant has only been open for a couple of months, the service at a four-star establishment should be as up to speed as the food. Our trepidations about the jalapeños could have been allayed by a check with the kitchen, and we should have been politely reassured. That our fears were curtly dismissed was disturbing.

The ceilings in Murray Circle and the adjacent Farley Bar are wondrous antique pressed tin rectangles — the kind you find in late 19th century buildings in lower Manhattan. The building itself is dedicated to John Muir, and its walls are decorated with fine black and white photography. Tables are set with white linens, except for a beautiful, bare-wood black walnut slab that serves as a communal table for eight. And through the windows are those breathtaking views.

Corkage is an ultra-steep \$25 a bottle, two-bottle limit, but it is waived for each additional bottle you buy from the list. And why not, when the wine list is instantly one of the finest in California? You'll find full pages of chablis (true chablis, which is chardonnay from the cold regions around Auxerre, France) and meursault from Burgundy — the former steely and flinty, the latter rich and mouth-filling — and both 100 percent chardonnay. Hard-to-find wines like the 2006 Radio Coteau "Savoy Vineyard" Pinot Noir from the Anderson Valley will cost you an even hundred bucks. But there are wonderful wines for less. The 2005 Cote de Tablas at \$40 is a lip-smacking treasure of a Rhone-style blend.

Every dish we sampled on a recent evening rated four stars, so the only detail noted

after each selection listed here is the price.

The food reveals Humphrey's talent for creating evocative combinations of flavors. For instance, Wild Sturgeon (\$18) from the Columbia River in Washington is rolled into a cylinder, wrapped in thin strips of smoked bacon, grilled in a wood fired oven, and served with creamy morel mushrooms.

Some items are offered in different preparations, so you can choose whichever you like. For example, the season is right for fresh English peas grown in the cool climate of Iacopi Farms in Half Moon Bay. Humphrey gives you a choice of these peas as a fresh, pureed Gazpacho (\$13) studded with whole English peas and given a chunk of citrus-fennel ice; or, if you're in a mood for something warm, stuffed into Ravioli (\$14) and served with a pistachio emulsion, baby carrots and an anise note given by French tarragon.

Heirloom Tomatoes (\$13) from Yolo County are paired with basil, of course, but also with compressed watermelon — little bites of watermelon squeezed almost dry. Young green garlic (\$13) from Knoll Farms in Contra Costa County is made into a mild-tasting vichyssoise studded with sweet grilled grapes, crunchy radish bits and spiced almonds. The flavors and textures strike a perfect balance.

Dungeness crab is available paired with sunflower seeds, vanilla, pears, and jalapeño, but our apprehension about the salmonella was unallayed, so we chose the crab, caught by the crew of the Rony Lynn of Half Moon Bay, made into a scrumptious Creamy Crab Bisque (\$13) flavored with kaffir lime, and accompanied by a baked crab cake.

Chef Humphrey hauls out the plancha — a metal, griddle-like plate — to cook line-caught White Seabass (\$14) from Morro Bay, pairs it with tender, lightly charred squid, and wraps up everything in a luscious toasted garlic-saffron emulsion. It's quite spectacular. Just as spectacular is the Wood Roasted Rib-Eye Steak (\$22) served in a grape gastrique (a gastrique is a reduction of caramelized sugar and vinegar usually, as here, paired with fruit). The beef is from grass-fed cattle (very healthy for you) raised by Marin Sun Farms in Point Reyes. Also on the plate, healthy-fat-laden avocado.

You haven't tasted chicken until you've tried Humphrey's pasture-raised, heritage-breed Chicken (\$19), also from Marin Sun Farms. The white meat is formed into a cylinder of amazing juiciness, tenderness and flavor, while the dark meat is formed into a block of roast chicken goodness. To emphasize its chicken-ness (chicken-ality?), it's served with an egg cooked sunny side up.

Desserts were as delicious as everything else, and just as elaborately well-thought-out.

"Cherry Pie" (\$9) is set in quotes because it's not so much a piece of pie as an

architectural construction of almond financier (a fancy tea cake made with ground almonds, brown butter, egg whites, and powdered sugar), sweet syrup, buttermilk ice cream and four big, pitted Bing cherries. The Malted Waffle (\$9) pairs a big Belgian-style waffle with roasted banana coins, coconut sorbet and candied macadamia nuts.

To sum up: Enter a time warp that takes you back 100 years, only to find foods of the future perfectly prepared today.

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