12 Days of Christmas
MEADOWOOD OFFERS FESTIVE HOLIDAY ELEGANCE IN ST. HELENA, CALIFORNIA.

By Wolf Schneider

RIVE UP MEADOWOOD'S ENTRANCE IN SUMMER and you'll find yourself surrounded by the sweet scent of star jasmine, the white starlike flowers blossoming on hedges throughout the resort. Arrive in winter, and you'll discover this grand country estate, with its 85 clapboard cottages and wooden lodges spread over 250 wooded acres, decked out for the holidays in elegant Dickensian tradition. White holiday lights sparkle. Fireplaces crackle as wood smoke drifts from chimneys. Hot cider and just-baked Christmas cookies beckon in the lobby, which is decorated in velvets the color of the California cabernets served at the nightly wine reception. Balls of light glow in the
redwoods, and grapevine wreaths with tallow berries hang on cottage doors.

Tucked into a pocket canyon in the hillside just off the Silverado Trail in exclusive St. Helena (population: 6,000) in the heart of northern California's Napa Valley, Meadowood was built in 1964 as a private country club for the vintners here in renowned wine country. Today, Meadowood is possibly Napa Valley's most luxurious resort, regularly appearing on the Travel + Leisure 500 List. The décor: clean-lined, elegant country. Accommodations like the secluded Treeline Cottages boast vaulted ceilings with wooden cross beams, stone fireplaces, marble bathrooms, and private patios for breakfasting among the bay laurel, big-leaf maple, coastal live oaks, and giant Douglas fir trees. You may see a wild turkey toddle by, and will most likely awaken to a crow, raven, or jay announcing the day.

Meadowood is its own world. At the country spa, you can opt for the Grape Seed Antioxidant Facial with polyphenols to promote new cell growth. Tee up for year-round golf or head to the just-opened-in-2011 golf performance studio with TrackMan technology to perfect your swing. Play tennis on one of the seven Plexipave hard courts, swim laps in the adult pool (weather permitting), or hike on forested trails frequented by deer and raccoons.

There's even a croquet lawn complete with mallets and wickets: Think polo without the horses, and wear all white. Assures Meadowood's head croquet pro Mike McDonnell, "You can play it whether you're 8 or 80. It's a game of strategy and cunning." "Meadowood"s father brought tournament croquet to California in the '60s, and McDonnell grew up watching his father wield a mallet with the likes of Sam Goldwyn and David Niven. "A lot of people who get injured from tennis or golf still want to play a competitive game, so they play croquet," McDonnell says.

But the sine qua non of Meadowood's holiday season is its 12 Days of Christmas event, with 12 famed chefs partnered with 12 preeminent Napa Valley vintners to present 12 feasts on 12 nights (this year from December 2 to 17), with a portion of the proceeds going to the Share Our Strength nonprofit to fight childhood hunger. The truth is, dining at Meadowood any night is exceptional. Chef Christopher Kostow's brilliant forays into molecular gastronomy involve applying French, Scandinavian, and Japanese techniques to Napa fare in four-course seasonal tasting menus that Forbes concurred are "technical cerebral." (continued on page 108)
Pistachio Marzipan and Almond Gianduja Truffles
Pastry Chef Boris Portnoy, The Restaurant at Meadowood

For Pistachio Marzipan:
250 grams raw pistachios
161 grams powdered sugar
50 grams inverted sugar
80 grams simple syrup

For Almond Gianduja Filling:
390 grams milk chocolate
(Vallrhona 40 percent Jivara Lactée), melted
360 grams almonds, toasted
60 grams butter

To make marzipan: Grind pistachios in a food processor until finely ground. Add sugars and simple syrup and grind into a shiny paste. Wrap in a plastic wrap and keep at room temperature.

To make filling: Grind toasted almonds in a food processor until finely ground. In a bowl, mix ground almonds, melted chocolate, and butter. Cover bowl and let cool in the refrigerator until chocolate mixture is pliable. Roll 2 teaspoons of mixture into a ball using fingertips and place on a waxed paper-lined tray. Repeat with remaining mixture. Chill until firm.

To finish: Roll out a 2-inch square piece of marzipan between plastic or on a marble surface using a rolling pin. Cut out a square large enough to wrap the chocolate filling in, and roll the pistachio marzipan around it. For garnish, serve the truffles in a bed of crystalized ginger.
Savor a heavenly dinner of delicate, deconstructed carrot soup; crayfish with morels, peas, and truffles; Morbier cheese with apricot, verbena ash, and sassafras honey; and Amaro-glazed garden blackberries with buckwheat, chocolate crémeux, and warm olive oil. Inspired finessé! Wine pairings venture beyond chardonnays and cabernets, too. No wonder general manager Alain Negueloua can point out, “We’ve earned the three Michelin stars. We’re only one of two in the West—the other being The French Laundry—and one of nine in the entire United States.”

No wonder the savvy San Francisco lawyer sipping a Schramsberg Blanc de Blanes sparkling wine in the lobby portal muses, “You can go to Rome or Paris and pay a fortune, and have to pack and fly. But you can get here easier, and have great food and wine. At the holidays, it’s festive and calm and beautiful. If you’re caught up in the city hustle and bustle, here you can unplug. It’s wonderful fireplace weather and great wine weather. It’s as good as it gets.”