

Restaurant at Meadowood keeps 4 stars

By Michael Bauer

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There's no doubt that chef Christopher Kostow is an artist - a word he doesn't use to describe himself - but since he got a new studio, his food has evolved and grown more personal.

In January, the Restaurant at Meadowood closed for a remodel. The already handsome dining room was spruced up with darker wood, more comfortable leather chairs and more room between the white-clothed tables. But the real change came in the million-dollar kitchen face-lift.

Before that, Kostow, who holds four Chronicle stars and three Michelin stars, worked in a space shared with the banquet kitchen. Now he has his own kitchen, all white, stainless steel and gleaming. After the meal - either a nine-course tasting menu (\$225) or an extravagant chef's-counter menu (\$500) - diners can go into the kitchen to watch the synchronized ballet of the white-coated staff creating dishes for the 60 to 75 lucky diners.

Kostow has continued to expand his techniques and strengthen his bond to the Napa Valley, inspired by his garden. The nine-course meal begins with a pastry pillow with a tiny orange flower on top, served on a similarly shaped pillow. As the pastry cracks, it releases a creamy gush of whipped feta scented with Mexican marigold and savory.

This juxtaposition of textures is a common thread that runs through all the dishes on Kostow's continually evolving menu, as he tries to surprise and engage diners with an orchestrated progression of dishes. No menus are provided until the end of the meal; it's personalized with the diner's first name and the date, followed by a run-on parade of words highlighting the most important ingredients. That only tells about 1 percent of the story.

Whipped yogurt is contrasted with sweet black sesame, pickled plum and shiso in one dish, and with pumpkin mole in another, in which squash is served in several guises. Raw spiny lobster tail with avocado and Osetra caviar nestles below the dome of a flaxseed tuille in another dish, a bold juxtaposition of contrasts between the very tender fish, the bright burst of fish eggs and the crisp, earthy crunch of the tuille.

Handsome pottery

Each complex combination has its own unique plate, often handsome Japanese pottery. One of the most beautiful is a black bowl filled with mustard flowers set on another bowl with a warm rye porridge on the bottom, layered with kohlrabi and garnished with pickled mustard seeds, pickled kohlrabi, tiny mustard flowers and greens.

Then out comes a cast-iron pot with sturgeon wrapped in cabbage and buried in ashes. The pot returns to the kitchen, where the fish is removed from its wrapper, sliced into fillets and quickly seared. It returns arranged with fermented pear puree, parsnip puree, compressed cabbage and coins of smoked bone marrow.

By the fourth course, I quit analyzing and gave myself over to the experience. It was quite a ride.

A beautiful bouillon, with snow-like flakes of dehydrated bone marrow, is poured tableside, marking the transition between the vegetable and seafood courses and the meat courses.

Then came a slice of duck with persimmon and maple, with the menthol contrast of chrysanthemum leaves; 35-day-aged beef with whey, tiny garden snails and onion horseradish jus spooned on tableside; and a disk of Epoisses pudding on a smear of plum jam and topped with a tuille of oats, buckwheat and Grape-Nuts.

That led to an Asian pear soda with warm frankincense sabayon; olive oil sorbet with mild onion-like leaves of day lilies; and a dessert of milk chocolate, passion fruit toffee, vanilla and crisp potato skins dusted with sugar.

The final offering, Stages of the Grape, captures the sense of place. It's served in a boat made of grapevines and lined with grape leaves. Candied grape leaves are rolled around grape-flavored white chocolate, looking like twigs; the flowers are made of meringues with a dollop of grape-seed oil in the center; chocolate melt-aways are flavored with Cabernet Sauvignon; and marshmallow balls are filled with grappa.

Although Kostow and restaurant manager Nathaniel Dorn curate the experience meticulously, not everything is perfect. After you

make your reservation and put down your credit card - if you cancel with less than 48 hours' notice, you'll be charged \$225 a person - you'll be asked the names of your guests "so we can personalize the menu." Then you'll be asked which menu you prefer, any dietary restrictions or preferences, and an e-mail address. That's all well and good, but a second call asking for the same information was overkill.

Unpretentious

Attempts are made to remove pretension from the meal, with varied success. Waiters can be overly friendly, asking what you're going to be doing for Thanksgiving, and the music is incongruous: Florence and the Machine, Bruce Springsteen, the Beatles and Billie Holiday.

Immediately after being seated, the waiter asked if we'd like Champagne or a cocktail, followed quickly by a request for wine choices. How can you choose a wine, I asked, when you have no idea what you're going to eat?

He explained the staff could do a combination of pairings, by the glass and half or whole bottles, but that didn't clear up the confusion. We also didn't have the benefit of the sommelier, so the waiter described the wine we asked about; he was pretty good, but consultations shouldn't be left to the waiters.

It may be my quirk, but I hate not knowing what I'm going to eat. I'd rather replace the surprise of the next course with the anticipation of what is coming next. Yet once decisions are made, these minor glitches fade quickly as you soar in Kostow's star-studded galaxy.

The Restaurant at Meadowood

900 Meadowood Lane (off Silverado Trail), St. Helena; (707) 967-1205. therestaurantatmeadowood.com

Dinner 5:30-10 p.m. Monday-Saturday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Free lot.

Overall Rating: FOUR STARS

Food Rating: FOUR STARS

Service Rating: THREE STARS

Atmosphere Rating: FOUR STARS

Prices \$\$\$\$

Noise Rating Noise Rating: TWO BELLS

RATINGS KEY

FOUR STARS = Extraordinary; THREE STARS = Excellent; TWO STARS = Good; ONE STAR = Fair; NO STARS = Poor

\$ = Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under; \$\$ = Moderate: \$11-\$17; \$\$\$ = Expensive: \$18-\$24; \$\$\$\$ = Very Expensive: more than \$25

ONE BELL = Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels); TWO BELLS = Can talk easily (65-70); THREE BELLS = Talking normally gets difficult (70-75); FOUR BELLS = Can talk only in raised voices (75-80); BOMB = Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings. Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.

Reviewers: Michael Bauer (M.B.), Nicholas Boer (N.B.), Mandy Erickson (M.E.), Amanda Gold (A.G.), Janny Hu (J.H.), Allen Matthews (A.M.) and Carey Sweet (C.S.)

Michael Bauer is The San Francisco Chronicle restaurant critic. Find his blog daily at insidescoopsf.com, and go to www.sfgate.com/food to read his previous reviews. E-mail: mbauer@sfgate.com Twitter: @michaelbauer1

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