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Meadowood chef Christopher Kostow gets 4 stars

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The tasting menu at the Restaurant at

Meadowood began with a waiter bearing a brown velvet pillow on top of which rested an *amuse* of house-made crackers, garnished with a minuscule flower and leaf from the restaurant's gardens. It looked like what a ring bearer might carry down the aisle. Was it edible, or was it a jewel?

As I popped the bonbon into my mouth and chewed, the initial crunch gave way to a gush of warm, salty goat cheese. It provided a dramatic start to a beautifully paced and executed dinner.

Then, still before the official first course arrived, the kitchen sent out a baked potato parfait, a custard cup layered with smooth potato puree, custard, herbed gelee, crispy potatoes and whole oysters, creating another example of how chef Christopher Kostow artfully marries opposing textures and flavors.

Soon afterward we received a plate mounded with "rye dirt" where fine bread crumbs mixed with salt, and tiny radishes and carrots dipped in butter "grow" from the mixture. While Kostow cooks from the garden, it's with craft and whimsy.

When I reviewed the restaurant more than a year ago, I thought that Kostow, a 2008 Chronicle Rising Star, was destined to become a four-star chef but needed time to prove himself. My recent meal has shown he's done just that. From start to finish, he commands the kitchen, creating dishes you won't find on any other menu, served in a dining room awash with elegance and good taste.

Diners can opt for a three-course menu for \$75, with choices in each category (optional wine pairings, \$45). But Kostow saves his most creative efforts for the \$155 eight-course tasting menu (optional wine pairings, \$105), which is what I chose on my most recent return visit.

After the complimentary courses, the meal kicks off with a long, tissue-thin strip of vivid red Wagyu beef, cured in pine from the property. It has a slight resinlike flavor and looks like a psychedelic forest topped with circles of pickled kohlrabi, lengths of sea beans, dollops of caviar and little puddles of creme fraiche with the airy texture of whipped cream.

That's followed by an equally artful arrangement of cannelloni, stuffed with sweetbreads on a

creamed spinach puree, bejeweled with dots of butter-braised turnips, delicate leaves of miner's lettuce, hedgehog mushrooms, slices of truffles and a truffle broth poured on tableside.

Every luxury ingredient is given star treatment, including lobster roasted in lime salt. It's served with dollops of sweet squash puree, cubes of caramelized sauteed apples and a restrained scattering of vadouvan, an Indian-inspired spice blend. Again the blend of exotic flavors and unlikely combinations came off seamlessly.

But the standout was the meat course of nickel-size medallions of tender goat meat poached in whey. They're garnished with a scattering of barley, dots of goat cheese, delicate yellow flowers, a splash of olive oil and just-sprouted blades of grass plucked from the winter vineyards. The meat is as tender and mild as chicken, yet with a sweet earthiness that sets it apart.

On another course the presentation was just as alluring. Kostow slices squab breast thin and arranges it so precisely that it looks like miniature packaged bacon, set on a bed of toasted pistachio butter, and covered with dollops of carrot puree, glazed cocoa nibs and tiny carrots, all dusted with grated frozen foie gras.

The cheese course is an intricately constructed Stilton "cheesecake" made from a finger-size rectangle of whipped cheese, a tuille crust and a topping of white port gelee. A necklace of dried cherries and hazelnuts set off the main ingredient.

That was followed by a vibrant green apple sherbet, with a scoop of ginger sorbet, vanilla gelee that's dried and becomes crisp and a mint snow. The main dessert brings a white chocolate and foie gras ganache - the liver adding richness and just a hint of flavor - accompanied by passion fruit and a rectangle of caramelized banana. Wheels of confit black walnuts add drama, as does a thin line of passion fruit puree and a swipe of cookie dough that was the night's only unsuccessful element - it looked like an accident and was unpleasantly grainy.

When chefs operate on a culinary high wire, there's bound to be a miss now and then, which makes the successes even sweeter. The meal ends the way it began with another parade of surprises - sugared raspberries, tiny filled cookies and glossy chocolates.

The dinner takes on an even more elegance given the sophisticated interior and bucolic setting. By day the windows look out onto a covered terrace and afford sweeping views of the Mayacamas Mountains; at night the dining room feels like a beautiful country retreat. Service is refined, with waiters appearing when you need them and then effortlessly blending into the background.

The decision to reopen the restaurant after a three-year hiatus a few years back was a good one for those who love this grand style of dining. Kostow is in fine form, rarely missing a beat and leaving diners practically breathless waiting for his next feat of culinary acrobatics.

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