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The Napa Valley restaurant scene

Restaurant critic S. Irene Virbila visits Napa establishments, including Bardessono, Brix Bottega, Hog Island Oyster, the Fatted Calf, Meadowood, Ad Hoc and Ubuntu.

By S. Irene Virbila restaurant critic reporting from napa valley >>>
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Every couple of years I feel that siren call to go up and spend some time in Napa Valley. For most of us, this was our first wine country experience, as exotic as anything discovered later in Burgundy or Piedmont. Who can forget the smudged violet of the hills, the rows of vines with mustard blooming bright yellow at their feet? The cool dark of the cellars or the view from Auberge du Soleil or Domaine Chandon?

Cruising across the Carquinas Bridge from the East Bay, I point the car north on Highway 29 past big box stores, American Canyon, a Burgundian cooper's warehouse and the iconic statue of a vineyard worker pressing grapes. Here it comes now, the deep wavering green of the vineyards in the golden late-afternoon light. I cut over to the Silverado Trail, where impatient locals driving trucks tailgate tourists meandering along, taking in the view, while a flock of bicyclists, legs churning, whiz by. Not much different from the last time I was here a couple of years ago. And from the time before that. And before that.

Low-key elegance

The classic wine country resort **Meadowood** has a new chef too. He's Christopher Kostow, who got raves at Chez TJ in Mountain View. In the bar one night, a couple of well-heeled foodies from Arizona were reminding the chef about the last time he cooked for them as if he would remember every detail. Instead of going straight in to dinner, I had an aperitif on the veranda overlooking the croquet lawn and putting green, and the mountains beyond. Meadowood exudes a sense of seclusion and privilege and after Bottega's grandiose space, I was struck by the restaurant's intimate, low-key elegance. You can go for the nine-course tasting menu or opt for the four-course summer menu (with two choices in each course). A cheese course makes it five, so ordering is easy and allows Kostow to show what he can do.

His cooking is beautifully crafted and precise, refined as opposed to rustic or gutsy. Poached pullet egg with glazed morels, peas and Parmesan was wonderful with a Chardonnay. Pristine turbot was topped with a sliver of Serrano ham and presented with miniature crispy pig's trotter and velvety porcini in a little corn milk. Poached and roasted squab, served very rare, with wild rice, foie gras and the sweet lusciousness of apricot was perfect for a Pinot Noir. And who wouldn't love *pain perdu* (French toast) with cherries and a bitter almond ice cream?