

San Francisco Chronicle

Dining Update: Chef's talents bloom at Meadowood

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Wednesday, May 21, 2008

It would make the perfect reality show: "The Chef Shuffle."

Christopher Kostow made a name at Chez TJ in Mountain View, earning three stars from The Chronicle for his food and two stars from the Michelin guide. A



hundred miles away, in the Napa Valley, Joseph Humphrey also earned three Chronicle stars and two Michelin stars as the reopening chef of the Meadowood resort restaurant.

Within months, however, Humphrey decided to move on to Murray Circle in the Cavallo Point Resort in Sausalito. In stepped Kostow, a Chronicle Rising Star, to take his place. (Bruno Chemel, a seasoned veteran, took over at Chez TJ, but that's another story.)

Would Kostow continue to cook as well in this new setting?

If this were a reality show, I'd wait for 12 weeks to reveal the answer, but the results are already in: He's doing even better.

Kostow has worked out all the quirks and superficial embellishments from Chez TJ and settled into the role of a seasoned, mature chef, cooking in a casually elegant environment that overlooks majestic redwoods, the Mayacamas

Mountains, and Meadowood's croquet court and golf course.

White geraniums dress up the window boxes that can be seen from the dining room and the dining terrace, where tables are set with crisp linens, sparkling crystal and gleaming flatware. It's a much more refined, sophisticated stage for his immense talents.

Elegant starters

The meal begins with four bites arranged on a translucent black rectangular plate: a nickel-size roll of rye crumbs that encase a barely warm oyster that gushes its briny liquid; a half hard-cooked quail egg, topped with golden char roe; a square of panisse (fried chickpea cake), topped with a tiny bit of seafood; and perfect baby radishes, each barely bigger than a pea and drizzled with coarse salt. It's an alluring but sensible presentation with bold flavors that foreshadow Kostow's elegant, newly found restraint.

When the plates are whisked away by well-trained waiters, who are still a little awkward in their approach, it's only a few minutes before Kostow begins to demonstrate how the Napa Valley has inspired him.

Diners can choose the chef's tasting menu of eight courses for \$140. Those less enthusiastic about devoting three hours or so to a meal can scale things back by choosing three courses, with options in each category, for \$75, four for \$90, or five for \$105. All can be matched with wine.

In the "Local Gardens" selections, he bakes a puffy but satisfyingly dense white asparagus souffle in a square porcelain container, setting it on a plate with a langoustine curled around two tiny spears of white asparagus, a sprinkling of the fiery Basque pepper, piment d' Espelette, and cooling bits of raw lemon and lime. It's a small package, but the flavors are explosive.

Another example is a slow-smoked Jidori chicken egg fenced in by a paper-thin slice of green asparagus nestled next to two fat tips, a few sprigs of baby watercress and silver dollar-size toasted English muffins. He adds a silken mousseline sauce for a breathtakingly creative take on classic flavors.

"Nearby Waters" contains four equally alluring dishes, including two finger-size rectangles of kampachi, stained yellow by vadouvan, an Indian spice with curry leaves, fenugreek, mustard seeds, garlic and other seasonings. They're arranged over braised butter lettuce layered with crab and mint. Alongside are perfect dots of white yogurt, orange crab jus, a few fresh peas and squiggles of clarified butter, making the dish look like a beautiful modern painting.

In another artful presentation, which tastes even better than it looks, Kostow places two small pan-seared fillets of turbot on a puree of lemon peels with slices of artichoke hearts and shaved caper berries. Artichoke broth, tomato confit, julienne preserved lemon and olive oil add color.

The "Pasture & Ranches" section features one of the best beef dishes I've had: a slow-cooked round of beef tenderloin nestled next to little pellets of brioche gnocchi, gauzy, smoky grilled chicories and morels.

Bold, but balanced

The suckling pig includes three preparations, looking as delicate as dessert on the oversize plate: a perfect petit four square of pork with a crisp top, a baby chop and a nickel-size round of loin so meticulously wrapped in bacon that it appears as if the stripes of fat and meat have been painted on. It's served with a teaspoon of caraway-scented cabbage, pea-size drops of maple syrup and pearl-size balls of pickled apples, with a tiny tarragon leaf carefully positioned over each one; it could look incongruous and silly if the flavors weren't so bold and balanced.

That same balance shows on one of his amuse-bouches: a briny sea urchin ice cream topped with little bits of sweet mango, alongside peppery radishes. Kostow's flavors are so carefully woven together and meticulously presented that the savory courses end up looking like dessert. Or maybe I should say his desserts look like savory courses. While the main courses were flawless, the sweets left us a tad unsatisfied, and for the first time I felt like flavor had been sacrificed for presentation.

Uneven desserts

Blenheim apricots, which have a short season, were the core of one dessert, but he diminished their impact by making the fruit into a gelee that was cut into a rectangle and placed on the plate with a sheet of white chocolate and a little parfait of white chocolate, pickled apricot, white chocolate sorbet and Marcona almond powder.

Like many chefs, Kostow is intrigued by adding incongruous savory flavors to his sweets: strawberries with black olive caramel, and rhubarb and yogurt with tarragon. They don't always work and seem less satisfying and integrated than the savory courses.

Yet Kostow's creativity is to be admired and applauded. With a little more time at the stove, he could well become the Bay Area's next four-star chef. Whether that happens will be revealed in season two of our fantasy reality show.

Restaurant at Meadowood

900 Meadowood Lane (off Silverado Trail), St. Helena; (707) 967-1200 or www.meadowood.com/winecuisine/the-restaurant.

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