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AMAZING CELADON DINING

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SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST EXTRAORDINARY FINE DINING VENUES ARE IN NAPA VALLEY, LESS THAN AN HOUR'S DRIVE. IT IS APPROPRIATE THAT IN THIS FOOD, WINE, AND ENTERTAINMENT ISSUE FOR US TO COVER ONE OF THE BEST OF THESE.



We visited the Historic Napa Mill and had an unforgettable dining experience at Celadon's extraordinary restaurant. An inside dining room provides a lavishly decorated space for 42 diners. We ate in an adjoining covered outdoor space that could accommodate 60 diners. The dining area is surrounded on three sides by scarred and partially painted brick walls that are remnants of the building's origins as an ancient warehouse. The fourth side is a living wall created by such a profusion of plants, vines, and creepers that we might have been dining in a restaurant in Fiji or Kauai. All those green growing plants were appropriate to the restaurant's theme, since we learned that "Celadon" is a name both for a pale shade of green and for a type of Chinese porcelain that color.

Greg Cole, the owner, opened Celadon 15 years ago. We spoke with him and discovered that he has a delightful attitude towards the science and art of cooking. The cuisine is nominally fusion, but many of the menu choices break with the typical fusion style. Greg told us that he avoids rules when it comes to the ingredients and design of a particular dish. "The lid has been off the box for a long time," he said with a smile.

As a result, Greg's menus contain many influences besides Asian. Greg said that when preparing a new culinary creation, he will use whatever ethnic styles that will



make the dish work. If an Italian flavor will do the trick, he will make it Italian. Or, if a particular dish could benefit from a continental style, he will use French ingredients. Or give it a Mediterranean flair if the dish calls for such ingredients as olive oil or feta cheese.

Greg received his formal education at New York's Culinary Institute of America (CIA). He lived in Hilton Head, South Carolina for a while and said that he was completely charmed by the reduced pace of life and with those beautiful Southern Belles speaking in their delightful accents. Greg said that the charm wore off after about three months. Then he was ready to go someplace more edgy with a quicker tempo of living and with speech patterns that were more direct and to-the-point.

Greg spent a couple years cooking at Harrah's in Lake Tahoe. But one day in 1985 he had dinner at E'toilé at the time the restaurant was not called etoile, but simply *Domaine Chandon*, it was renamed E'toilé about six years ago, the Michelin-starred restaurant at Domaine Chandon. Greg said that it was the best meal he had ever eaten so the next day he went back, stood at the kitchen door, and told Chef Philippe Jeanty, "I had dinner here last night."

"So?"

"I want to work for you."

"Do you have a resume?"

Greg said that he didn't have a resume, but returned four weeks in a row until the chef finally relented and hired him. Greg spent

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three years there learning from that master.

Celadon is on the shores of the Napa River and we learned from Greg that the structure was built in 1884 as a warehouse to accommodate the bustling trade that was being carried out between Napa and The City. In those days, there was a large tanning industry in the area. We learned that, even though it has an extra ‘p’, the famous Nappa Leather originated in the area and was shipped through the warehouse. Other products that came through included cotton, fruit, walnuts, beef, sheep, and pork.

The central focus of our Celadon dining experience, of course, involved food. Choices on both the lunch and dinner menus are divided into four categories labeled Specialty Cocktails, Small Plates, Green Plates, and Big Plates. We sampled one of the Small Plates — Crispy Soy Braised Pork Belly With Watermelon And Daikon Salad, Sweet Soy And Fresh Herbs. I would have expected the competing textures and tastes of the pork and watermelon to be a little bizarre, but for some reason the combination was amazing. Another melt-in-our-mouths Small Plate was Maine Pecky-Toe Crab Cake With Asian Slaw And Ginger Aioli.

Lunch menu prices at Celadon start at five dollars. Everything on the lunch menu was under \$20, except for one of the Big Plates — Togarashi Scallops With Basmati Rice And Sweet Corn, Yuzu Beurre Blanc And Carrot Salad. We tried that and it was a perfectly delicious concoction. We enjoyed every bite. We also very much enjoyed sampling the Beef Satay With Cucumber, Green Papaya And Pickled Ginger Salad, and Spicy Peanut Sauce.

Greg brought out two of the specials for that day — Braised Mongolian Beef with Onion Rings, Mashed Potatoes, and Green Beans. Plus, a Hawaiian Snapper, called Onaga, served with perfectly delicious black rice, carrots, and broccoli, and topped with a pickled cucumber salad. Both were extraordinary; the “pickled cucumber” was the best I ever ate. I wish I had a jar of that.

One of the most memorable dishes was Flash Fried Calamari With A Spicy Chipotle Chile Glaze and Pickled Ginger. The batter on the calamari was both light and crunchy, leaving the memory of a sweet aftertaste. The ginger looked like the familiar accompaniment to sushi, but had a delectable quality that was not found in any sushi bar ginger that I ever ate.

The hot food was served piping hot and, even better, the table servers served it to us on heated plates. That seemed a particularly nice touch, since a pet peeve of mine is having hot food served on cold plates so the food is lukewarm by the time you eat it.

Greg paired our entrées with a 2009 Morgan Pinot Noir Twelve Clones red wine and a 2010 Etude Pinot Gris, Carneros white. Both of them were perfectly fine accessories to the delicious food we were eating.

We met Marcos Uribe, who is Celadon’s Chef de Cuisine. He is a gifted and talented essential component in the excellence of Celadon dining. Uribe specializes in such things as cassoulet, stuffed pasilla chiles, and seared Asian five-spice duck breast.

Napa is less than an hour’s drive from our 110° Brentwood Office. There are many wonderful things to do in Napa Valley, of course. However, a meal at Celadon would be worth the trip if you didn’t do anything else. I am going back; I can’t wait! ||□°

For more information, go to www.celadon-napa.com, call 707-254-9690, email, or visit 500 Main Street, Napa. Send comments about the article to editors@110mag.com.