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The Art of The Meal

The first Santa Cruz Restaurant Week gives curious newbies, fussy foodies and appreciative regulars the chance to try something new

Profiles by Stett Holbrook and Christina Waters

IT WAS JUST a matter of time before Santa Cruz joined the ranks of cities across the country celebrating local culinary talent with Restaurant Week. In New York, Boston, Los Angeles and San Diego, chefs were joining together for a week each year to entice diners out of their routines and into cosmopolitan restaurants where they might discover exotic new flavors and textures. And those cities are not the cradle of sustainable produce or home to unique viticultural appellations.

This was the topic of conversation one July afternoon at the Cellar Door Cafe in the Bonny Doon Vineyard tasting room, where Dan Pulcrano, president of Metro Newspapers, sat shooting the breeze with newly installed chef Charlie Parker. The two agreed that if those cities could do a restaurant week, Santa Cruz could too. It has the talent, it has the terroir. It's becoming a dining destination in its own right as skilled chefs and winemakers set up shop, drawn by the local produce and natural beauty. Parker suggested putting on a Restaurant Week sooner rather than later, and a plan quickly began to form.

The first Santa Cruz Restaurant Week runs eight days, from Oct. 1 to Oct. 8, and features \$25 prix fixe menus from two dozen restaurants. That means that for a fraction of the price of three a la carte courses, diners can sample a trio of dishes from each establishment and in the process maybe discover a new favorite restaurant or remember the charms of an old one. It's a time to step out, experiment and push the boundaries--just like the talented chefs who are making this week possible.

Charlie Parker
Cellar Door Cafe

On the Menu: Slow-roasted pork shoulder with pecorino polenta and braised greens, whole fried rock cod with sweet corn, roasted dry-farmed tomato soup with torn bread and crème fraîche.



Photograph by Carlie Statsky

Stock Stars: From left to right, Santa Cruz chefs Charlie Parker of Cellar Door Cafe, Ben Sims of Avanti, Brad Briske of Gabriella Café and Damani Thomas of Oswald.

DURING his three-month stint at Noma, a two-Michelin-star Danish restaurant regarded as one of the best in the world, Charlie Parker realized he'd had enough of fine dining restaurants. Eating in other star-bestowed restaurants around Europe added to the feeling.

"It didn't seem as fun anymore," he said. "It was too stuffy to my liking."

Parker, 26, has been cooking for nearly 10 years. He is soft-spoken with short-cropped hair and built like a linebacker, stout and strong. In fact, he was a middle linebacker in high school and still looks like he could maul his way through a heavily fortified offensive line. From a young age he's had a passion for cooking.



Photograph by Carlie Statsky

You're A Good Chef, Charlie Parker: Working at two Michelin-starred restaurants taught the Cellar Door chef the sanctity of good ingredients.

"By the time I was in the fourth grade I would go straight home and watch Great Chefs of the West," he says, referring to the late, great public television cooking show. He served as short order cook for his family, whipping up snacks and sandwiches before tackling dinner. He got his first job in a professional kitchen at 17 and has been cooking ever since.

"[Cooking] is something you'll never know enough about," he said. "I'm constantly learning."

The Menlo Park native had previously cooked at top Bay Area restaurants like Manresa, Ubuntu and the Village Pub when he headed off for an internship at the famed Copenhagen restaurant in January. While he valued his experience at Noma, he longed to work at a more casual restaurant that served great food, but where it was OK to relax with friends and get a little loud--a combination he says can be hard to find. And then he got an email from Manresa's David Kinch. Kinch, who had groomed Parker from a green California Culinary Academy extern into his sous-chef, was offering him a job as executive chef at Bonny Doon Vineyard's new Cellar Door Cafe. Kinch had teamed up with Bonny Doon's Randall Graham to revamp the cafe-within-a-tasting room, and he thought Parker would be perfect for the job.

At Manresa, Kinch had been impressed by Parker's discipline, hard work and commitment to letting the quality of the ingredients shine rather than flexing his technique to render his own personal stamp on the food. "For a young cook, he has fully grasped that the quality of ingredients is paramount to what you do," says Kinch.

The economy stinks now, but last winter it was apocalyptic, so a job offer was compelling. But just as appealing to Parker was the fact he would be able to cook the kind of rustic-yet-refined food he loved in a more convivial setting.

"Of course I accepted it," he said. By April he was on the job in Santa Cruz.

Like a parent watching children leave home and start lives of their own, Kinch takes great pleasure in seeing his former cooks

strike out on their own. Two Manresa alumni started Ubuntu, a high temple of vegetarian cuisine. Former Manresa chef de cuisine James Syhabout recently opened Commis in Oakland to sensational reviews. And now Parker has left Manresa nest to run his own place.

You might think that as a disciple of Kinch working for Graham, Parker's cooking would be pretty out there. Kinch is one of the most inventive and forward-thinking chefs in the world, while Graham is one of the world's most iconoclastic winemakers. Although I see influences of Manresa in Parker's cooking, such as his use of flowers and fruit in savory courses, his cooking is wholly his own.

He favors the big, generous flavors of Spain and Italy but brings techniques he's learned from his diverse culinary background to bear on the ingredients. On the plate his food appears perfectly thrown together. To watch Parker in the spare, open Cellar Door kitchen is to see him composing each dish to achieve a nonchalant yet artfully put-together look.

Good chefs also need to be more than deft cooks; they need to know how to work the room. And Parker does. Grab a seat at the bar and you'll see him mix it up with customers and talk to them about his food, often serving them personally.

As a chef, Parker is inspired by the seasons and locally sourced produce--just like every other chef in America. What makes his approach different, he says, is that the products he serves are truly local. Most come from within 10 miles of the kitchen door.

"I'm blessed in this area to have some of the best produce in the world," he says. "It's such a privilege to cook in this area."

Because he's developed good relationships with local growers, his ear is close to the ground, and he has an intimate knowledge of what's available and what's soon to be in season. As such, his three-course prix fixe menus change daily but are planned out two weeks in advance. Add in a chalkboard menu of snacks and small plates that change regularly, and you get a fleeting moment of local flavor framed on a plate.

A recent menu offered a snapshot of late summer fecundity. Silken, rich bowls of roasted dry-farmed tomato soup. Pan-roasted local squid with heirloom tomatoes, grilled melon and puréed mint. Pan-fried padrón peppers with smoked chèvre in a basil bud vinaigrette. My favorite was the grape-marinated kampachi with fire-blistered grapes, bresaola (salted, air-dried beef) and nasturtiums. The salty meat and sprinkle of sea salt played off the buttery fish and sweet grapes to create a delicious multilayered dish that was also beautiful to look at it.

While the menu is always changing, the popularity of some items has made them fixtures. Thin crust pizzas are a regular feature at Cellar Door, as are the smoked fingerling potatoes, certainly one of the world's great bar snacks. Noma smokes a lot of its food, and Parker brought the technique back with him. He parboils the potatoes before cold-smoking them over hickory on a barbecue outside the restaurant. Just before serving, he quickly fries them to finish them off.

"I think if I took them off the menu there would be an uproar," he said.

I can attest to that. An order of the smoky potatoes paired with satiny aioli always starts my meals at the cafe. The smokiness and richness of the potatoes had me hunting for bacon the first time I tried them. They're crazy good.

Looking over the menus to come (posted online at bonnydoonvineyard.com), you feel the weather getting cooler as root vegetables, kale, slow-braised lamb shank and smoke pork shoulder with cabbage and apples make their appearance and usher summer into fall.

In many ways, opening the cafe was a risk for Graham and Parker. The economy is still on life support, so any new business is a gamble. Graham's decision to offer prix fixe, family-style meals and seat strangers next to each other at long tables is an experiment in what he half jokingly calls "social engineering." And then there's the challenge of Santa Cruz itself. Would locals shell out for a chef-driven restaurant that steered clear of the same old thing?

Judging by the crowds that continue to fill the restaurant, the answer is a resounding yes.

Graham last month hired Joseph Mora, a veteran of restaurants and wine merchants in Napa and the East Bay, including Chez Panisse, to manage the cafe and tasting room. Mora is a sommelier graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, and, as an advocate of the "farm to table" movement, he and Parker share the same vision of forging direct relationships with local growers. Mora said the growing economic importance of the restaurant operations to the company prompted the reorganization of the tasting room operation.

Parker was motivated to offer premium quality food expertly prepared backed by professional service and an easy-going vibe. Before he came to Santa Cruz, that combination existed more in his head than in reality.

"There's no happy medium anywhere," he said. "It's hard to find that place that does both."

Until now, that is.

--Stett Holbrook

THE CELLAR DOOR CAFE
is at the Bonny Doon Vineyard tasting room, 328 Ingalls St.,
Santa Cruz; 831.425.4518.

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