

June 10, 2009

DOOR PRIZE

Even for master of reinvention Randall Grahm,
the Cellar Door is a knockout
By Christina Waters

AFTER three meals at the very new, very smart Cellar Door Café in the Bonny Doon Vineyard tasting room, I only wish I could dine there every Friday. On one occasion, I sampled a range of what chef Charlie Parker has up his wunderkind sleeve - from pork belly topped with house-smoked salmon roe to a salad of local greens, multicolored beets, fennel, hazelnuts and pecorino. Desserts included warm olive oil cake and stewed apricots and lemon poundcakes layered with organic strawberries and rose-scented cream. The flavor-driven list of small plates - applewood-smoked fingerling potatoes with aioli, pizzas du jour, cheese plates, cured seafoods--is available daily from noon on. But it's the three-course, prix fixe cafe menu that captures my attention.



Photograph by Jenn Ireland

Newly minted: Newcomer Charlie Parker shows off the Cellar Door's brown-butter-basted black cod with roasted summer squash and mint.

So European it risks controversy, the concept is simple and convivial. Diners opting for the family-style prix fixe dinners are seated at communal tables. If there are two of you, you'll be joined by others. My experience of this companion seating rekindled the joys of face-to-face discourse with people I came to appreciate and enjoy throughout the meal.

Dishes arrive on large platters, designed to be passed and shared. You choose your wine from the chalkboard menu. And of course you may add small plates - but be advised that Parker's kitchen has managed to sculpt the serving sizes so that each course is ample. Neither skimpy nor overwhelming.

We joined a couple from Los Angeles, their Santa Cruz-based son and his girlfriend at dinner last week, and it was instant chemistry from the first glass of Le Cigare Blanc (\$9). The full, rich Rhône blend held its own from salads and green olives to the evening's pizza bianca, its thin crust frosted with puréed cauliflower (surprisingly rich and buttery) and lightly topped with pecorino, two broccolis and morsels of bacon.

My companion's a la carte platter of sautéed strawberries and beets with local chèvre was another revelation of flavor contrasts that worked as sweet/salty partners. The foods lean deeply into each of their flavor components at the Cellar Door. Parker knows how to synergize the complex minerality of Grahm's wines, adding gorgeous and unknown flavor moves without grandstanding. In each course, the wines and the foods marry brilliantly.

THE CELLAR DOOR CAFÉ

Address: 328 Ingalls St., Santa Cruz

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Hours: Open noon-9pm, Wed-Sun

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