

## LUNCH AT THE FRENCH LAUNDRY

May 2, 2003

If you were to try to recall the best meals you have ever had in your life, odds are most of them would be dinners. Lunches probably would not make it to your top ten.

Well, let me tell you, a lunch Judy and I had today at the French Laundry in Yountville, just 20 minutes north of Napa, would be on the top of our list of best meals ever. Judy made the reservation 5 weeks ago to celebrate both of our birthdays: mine on May 1 and hers on May 7. She tried to make it a dinner reservation on any of those seven days, but the place was booked solid; lunch was available only on the 2nd, and only because of a cancellation. So lunch it was.

As the idea, "great lunch", percolated through my brain over the past 24 hours it brought up wonderful memories of other great lunches I haven't thought about for many years. Paris: the *degustacion* menu at the restaurant of Michel Pasquet, the youngest chef ever awarded a Michelin star, where even my man-about-town French client was impressed. Frankfurt: roast pork with a mustard sauce, where I was surprised to learn that Germany makes a sumptuous red wine. San Francisco at Le Central: *saucisson chaud* and the very seasonal butterflied shad roe *Dore* with a Chalone chardonnay. Copenhagen: a real *Smorebrod*. The lunch at the French Laundry today tops them all.

In case you don't know about the French Laundry, and its chef, Thomas Keller, it is perhaps the best restaurant in the world. Many food writers say it is, anyway.

For this lunch, Judy and I had two gift certificates, one for a birthday, and one from a Christmas past.

The French Laundry is housed in an old stone building, which really was a French laundry back in the late 1800s. The building contains many small rooms on two floors. Our room today was just off the entry, and had only three tables. One wall was of rough stone, a foot thick, with a double casement window looking out on a garden, framed by grape vines. There was a skylight high above us in the beamed ceiling. Passing rain showers drummed occasionally on the skylight during our lunch and glistened on the grape leaves at the window. There was a vase of fresh spring flowers on our table.

Our waiter was a Napa resident, whose neighbors include some of Napa's famous wine makers and growers whom he was happy to chat with us about. It gave us the feeling of being at a friend's home.

Both of us decided to go with the Chef's Tasting Menu of ten courses, counting the cookies at the end. We ordered a half-bottle of Clos Floridene, a Graves sauvignon blanc, to begin. Before the first course, a server gave us a Thomas Keller special treat, a canape Keller calls a "Cornet", which looks exactly like an ice cream cone, but is the size of your middle finger. The "cone" is made of a paper thin crepe formed into a cone, baked brown, and filled with red-onion *crème fraiche*. Looking like orange sherbet on top of the cone is a marble-sized scoop of salmon tartare with herbs. The cornet is served with the bottom two-thirds of the cone wrapped in a dainty white napkin.

For the first course, we had an oblong mound of California white sturgeon caviar sitting in a puddle of cauliflower puree with an oyster glaze. The mild cauliflower was enhanced by the salty caviar.

The second course was *foie gras*. Judy's was sauteed. The liver was scored and cooked over high heat to form a crisp crust; and served with pan juices deglazed with a

truffle syrup. It was garnished with a rhubarb confit. My *foie gras* was a terrine, served with orange marmalade and toasted brioche. Both dishes were outstanding, but Judy's, which she shared with me, was the better. Each bite exploded in our mouths with flavor. Along with this course, we were served house-made rolls with two different butters: one a mild, nutty butter from Vermont and the other a darker Marin County butter with a sharper flavor.

Our servers gave us new silver service with each course. Anticipating the next course, we were given a fish knife for poached halibut, on a sauce made with artichokes. A sprinkling of carrots and glazed pearl onions added color. The halibut was mild, even for halibut. The fish and the sauce together were a perfect blend of subtle flavors.

Next came a dish of Maine lobster -- a claw and a loin from the tail, poached in butter and served on top of a round of caramelized fennel with a lobster sauce made with Noilly Prat vermouth. On top of the lobster was a chrystallized fennel chip, translucent, lacy, crunchy, and sweet.

At this point we ordered a half bottle of 2001 Patz and Hall pinot noir. The grapes were from the Hyde vineyard in Carneros, which is the source of many of Napa's "cult" wines. The wine maker, Anne Moses, is infamous in the Valley as a single-minded perfectionist. Our waiter said she is a neighbor of his "three acres over", and deserves her "Old Ironsides" reputation. I think it was the best pinot noir I have ever had.

After the fish course, of course, comes the meat course -- for this menu, two courses. The first was pork: small scallops cut from the leg and served over a mushroom *duxelle* with a red wine glaze. The next was rib eye of lamb, a boneless cube of lamb, bright pink and juicy, glazed with a brown sauce, and served with a *cassoulet* of tiny mixed green and yellow pole beans, plus a couple of fava beans. The vegetables were braised with thyme-infused extra virgin olive oil. Although our servers added a serrated knife for this course, we didn't need it. We could cut the lamb with a fork.

Now, I like gravy. A lot. Even for a Southerner. And I can tell you for sure that the two sauces served with the meat courses were gravy *in excelsis*. One of the ingredients in the lamb sauce was mushroom powder. Keller is big on powders, which he says are "fun".

Believe it or not, at this point we did not feel stuffed. The French Laundry courses are exquisite, but small. Each course is served on plain white china over a white chaser, and each piece seems to be designed to fit and to show off the serving.

Now came the cheese course, and, by this time I am running out of superlatives, but the Brie was absolutely the best I have ever had. The narrow wedge had three layers, the top and bottom layers crusted and firm, with the pungent flavor typical of brie, but the center was the consistency of whipped cream, mild and buttery -- brie with brie sauce. The brie was served with glazed almonds and poached apricots. The combination of textures and flavors was nothing short of paradisiacal. Together with the pinot noir this might have been the pinnacle of the meal. Judy disagreed. She put the *foie gras* on top.

The wine was finished. We were full. But we had saved a little room for dessert. First, a marscapone sorbet with a layered terrine of pureed strawberries and champagne gelatin. On top of the terrine were three tiny pieces of strawberry that had the intense flavor of *fraises*.

I hadn't been counting the courses. I thought we had finished, but Judy knew better. And, sure enough, a server brought another silver service.

"There has to be chocolate," Judy said. And there was. A chocolate pudding, a chocolate gelatin, and a pear tart with both milk chocolate and dark chocolate sauce. A bite or two of each.

We thought maybe we would never eat again, but changed our minds when the cookies came. Tiny mouthfuls of seven different and sinfully delightful bakery treats.

Well, what do you think? Have I made this sound like the best lunch of our lives?