

DiRōNA RESTAURANT SPOTLIGHT

FARALLON: UNDER THE SEA CAN'T BE THIS GOOD

By Vickie Mabry, Managing Editor, Distinguished Dining

True confession: I've always had a thing for mermaids. As a young girl testing her artistic talents, mermaids were my favorite subject matter. As a young mother one of my best memories happened during what has become my favorite scene in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. A grin plastered on my own face, I watch with glee as Sebastian recruits members of the sea world to musically convince Ariel that life under the sea was the best place to be. I remember looking at my daughter's own wide smile and thinking it couldn't get any better. Well, I was right. It couldn't. And it hasn't. But I have found something that comes awfully close—a perfectly orchestrated meal at San Francisco's Farallon restaurant. I visited the restaurant this summer and came away with a whole new view of fine dining.

Located at 450 Post Street just off Union Square, Farallon's double-door entrance, with its carved fish-handles, hints at what lies on the other side. Once inside my friend and I found a noisy pre-theatre crowd sitting on octopus stools next to kelp columns under jellyfish lights. (I'm not kidding.) As the maitre d' led us to our table in the Pool Room, we noticed the floor resembled a sandy ocean floor. And, was that staircase made of caviar? Once seated near one of the giant custom-made sea urchin light fixtures, I paused to take it all in. Was I in Disneyland? That's when General Manager Chris Durie appeared and presented us with the menu that Chef Parke Ulrich had pre-selected for us and the evening began. In between each course, Chris and Chef Ulrich served up information on Farallon.

For appetizers we had Tartare of Spanish Mackerel with black caviar and Yukon gold potatoes swimming in a lemon coulis. With this we sipped a Billecart-Salmon Brut Rose from Champagne, Nevada. I was still overwhelmed by the physical property when Chris reemerged to explain that the building was built in 1925 for the Elks Club. We dined directly above the club's swimming pool, still in use today. An elaborate mosaic design of bathing beauties painted on three arches that once graced the pool's ceiling loom at one end of the room. I asked Chris to describe the heart and soul of Farallon. He said, "Escape."



For our second course, we were presented Seared Georges Bank Sea Scallops and asparagus served with fennel puree and sea urchin vinaigrette while Chris peppered us with interesting facts about his role in the restaurant. The toughest part of the job is finding and keeping motivated staff. When I asked about his hiring process, he retrieved a three-page "Interview Quiz" with questions like, "What does the term 'open hand service' mean?" and "What is Amarone?" Chris hires

people who are knowledgeable about their profession and then puts them through Farallon training.

We had Dover Sole, artichoke mousseline with a Choron sauce as our third course served with a 2003 Sauvignon Blanc from the Forefathers Vineyard in the Marlborough region of New Zealand. I watched as Chris joined the Farallon team bustling around a large open area to the kitchen, set apart from the restaurant like a stage. He stepped in to "orchestrate" so that Chef Ulrich could stop by to say hello. I asked the Chef about what I had just seen. He described the window as a "wheel" and his role there as the "ship's captain." He explained, "The prep is done. Now there's only time for execution. Someone has to watch everything before it leaves the kitchen."

Chef Ulrich sent over a serving of lemon ice cream and ginger snaps before the fourth course: a bowl of stew or, as the menu described it, Salmis of Sage Canyon Squab. In it were potato gnocchi, confit leg and black trumpet mushrooms. Our wine was a 2001 Pinot Noir, Skewis from the Floodgate Vineyard of Anderson Valley. Steven, one of two sommeliers present that evening, shared his style for making a customer comfortable with asking questions.

Dessert was a two-parter: El Rey Milk Chocolate Cheesecake featuring candied peanuts, fudge sauce, sprinkled with chocolate chantilly and Strawberry Rhubarb Tart with strawberry ice cream, streusel and vanilla anglaise. Executive Pastry Chef Emily Lucceti lives up to her reputation as one of the best. "For her, it's not about the look. It's all about the taste," according to Chef Ulrich. I share that philosophy. The food at Farallon managed—somehow—to eclipse the lusty, opulent interior; And the whole experience came dangerously close to unseating my daughter's face at the movies 16 years earlier when I thought it couldn't get any better.

For reservations, call (415) 956-6969 or visit www.farallonrestaurant.com.

Distinguished Dining
Fall 2004

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