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EATS, DRINKS & SCOOPS



DINING

serving sizzle

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It's another blissful evening at Menlo Tavern, the sophisticated, "new American" restaurant tucked within Menlo Park's timeless Stanford Park Hotel. Over glasses of wine, diners relax into conversations surrounded by old photographs and leather-bound books, while a fireplace brings a glow to the low-lit room. Such serenity makes it easy to forget that behind every candlelit dinner, a bustling kitchen staff is making the magic happen.

"Cook with your ears and your eyes," Louis Salvatore (Chef Sal) instructs his team over the hiss of hot skillets and the brisk drumming of knives. "Live in your food—listen, smell and hear." When Sal joins me in the dining room later, he expands on this sensory approach. "Your food's almost a small world," he says. "It's a hyper-focus on what you're doing because the food will tell you what is going on." Let the sizzle of the steak guide you to that perfect sear.

Though Menlo Tavern's elevated

ingredients and exquisite plating might merit the label "fine dining," Sal isn't a fan of the phrase. "It's like me saying I have the best food in the world," he grimaces. "We make good food. And it isn't uppity." The former executive chef of Left Bank Brasserie adds, "I'm not trying to make a fake mushroom and it tastes like cake. That's not the idea."

Sal first learned that elevated dining could be fresh and innovative during his time at Town and Country's Mayfield Bakery and Café (owned by the same group behind Spruce in San Francisco and The Village Pub in Woodside). He fondly recalls brainstorming sessions around the table, outlining new menu items with the team. "It would look like chicken scratch," he chuckles. But "we'd sit across from each other and bounce ideas off each other ... It was a dialogue that we kept going. It opened up my creativity again."

He's brought this spirit to his Menlo Tavern team. "It doesn't have to be this strict brigade with somebody yelling at you," Sal notes of commercial kitchens. "I never wanted to push that on my guys because you don't work well.



You can't be creative." The title "line cook" is another phrase Sal can do without. "We're molding them as chefs," he insists. And when this dream becomes reality? "I want to eat one day with them."

For someone as sensory as Sal, it tracks that his dishes are as aesthetic as they are appetizing. Order a salad and be presented with an entire head of butter lettuce expanding outwards like a flower, its leafy "petals" adorned with blossoms, lardon and a drizzling of Dijon vinaigrette, a chili-sprinkled poached egg at its center. Meanwhile, the king salmon topped with microgreens features a fan of asparagus with pansies perched atop each potato. "We call it a craft, but you can consider it an art form," Sal says of cooking.

For holidays or private events, the tavern's chef is known to

invent entire menus around the lyrics of a song or the lines of a poem. For Valentine's Day, Sal prepared five courses to represent the different stages of love. The First Date course featured duck atop puff pastry (signifying the many layers of that first conversation) and flourishes of truffle foam (symbolizing the nervous bubbles in your stomach). The Proposal, a surf-and-turf dish of wagyu beef and lobster, portrayed two separate entities coming together as one. And the dessert finale, Together Forever, formed a solar system with bonbon planets orbiting a red velvet cheesecake sun.

Sal's imagination extends to the use of unexpected ingredients. Right now, he's developing an homage to fried chicken made of duck confit. "'American' is a lot of things, right?" he points out. Sal also got inventive with the Menlo Tavern meatball. Though initially inspired by his Italian grandmother, he completely revamped the dish.



The outcome is an unexpectedly-light, snowball-sized appetizer made with wagyu beef, sauced in pomodoro, crowned with shavings of grana padano cheese and topped with cheery microgreen sprigs.

Sal is cooking up another idea just in time for summer: Fire and Flame, a series of twists on barbecue. “That’s what man did first,” points out Sal, who once headed the kitchen at The Pub at Ghirardelli Square where he dished up ribs and brisket. His new series, hosted Saturdays out on the hotel’s garden patio, will range from Argentine-style meats prepared on the parrilla to spit-roasted Italian porchetta. The warm weather also ushers in Stanford Park Hotel’s annual outdoor live music, held all season long, and

best enjoyed with a song-themed cocktail in hand, like Oye Como Va or Dock of the Bay.

But Sal is a man of action, not just ideas. “I’m not here to just write a menu,” he insists. “Every single chef I’ve met that was amazing, was humble ... They would be there with you, in service. And not just calling a ticket.” Accordingly, he likes to stay in the mix, teaching and growing in the kitchen. “I even take advice from my dishwasher!” He pauses, then admits, “My dishwasher used to be a chef, actually.”

“A good chef’s always learning—constantly,” Sal says as he rises and prepares to return to his hard-working team behind the scenes. “I’ll be learning until I die.” **P**

american classics

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