

SPRING 2008

# Savor

## WineCountry

# Spring's Sensations

### A FRESH START

Winemaker Richard Arrowood sets off to follow his heart

### OUT AND ABOUT

Best restaurants, sunny spots, overnights and spring-flowering gardens

### NANCY SKALL

In the kitchen with the grande dame of produce





Epicurean destinations that pair exquisite cuisine with top-notch accommodations make overnights a must



There's no need to rush a visit to Sonoma if you stay overnight at the El Dorado Hotel, above, which is above the El Dorado Kitchen.

Pairing a gourmet meal with welcoming overnight accommodations — all under a single roof — may be the apogee of self-pampering, but it's also rooted in common good sense. And, it's a notion that brings new life to an old-world tradition where evening meals and rooms for overnight stays were offered at inns and roadhouses. Here, the restaurant is often the point of the journey.

No need to hurry a meal, meter your wine consumption, pass up the digestif or ask the maitre d' to call a cab when you're just a few footsteps away from your pillow.

In Europe this class of nonpareil hotels and restaurants is grouped as "Relais & Chateaux." Guests are treated to an elegant experience that allows them to stretch out a meal to impossible hours. The restaurant is not there simply as an amenity of convenience or to win another star; it is an epicurean destination with enough muscle to excel in its own right.

Twenty years ago, restaurateur Claude Rouas brought the tradition to Wine Country, etching a series of luxury "maisons" into a Napa Valley hillside surrounding his already critically acclaimed restaurant, Auberge du Soleil. Since then, similar fine pairings of food and accommodations have materialized. The options range from La Toque by the atmo-

TURN TO PAGE 50 ►



# DINE & DREAM

STORIES BY MEG MCCONAHEY • PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLIE GESELL





After indulging in the Dry Creek Kitchen's menu, such as grilled rare ahi tuna with rice noodles, above, visitors can take a short walk upstairs to spend a night in a luxurious room at the Hotel Healdsburg.

► FROM PAGE 49

spheric Old California-style Rancho Caymus in Rutherford to the romantic elegance of Madrona Manor in Dry Creek to the choreographed formality of a meal at Cyrus in Healdsburg, where the doors nightly spill open into the lobby of the exquisitely petite Les Mars Hotel.

The restaurant may not always be formally affiliated with the inn, but their proximity allows the two to work in symbiotic harmony.

"It enables you to slow down and really enjoy the impact of the experience more," says Robert Curry, the executive chef at Auberge. Here, he says, guests can linger long into the evening on the deck, not looking at the bright lights of a city but at the twinkling stars above.

Stripping the evening of tight scheduling and transportation worries frees the diner to sink into a completely different mindset, he maintains, shutting out all distractions and training the spotlight strictly on the meal.

"All the decisions are made for you," says Curry. "All you have are the easy decisions, like what you would like to eat tonight. Everything else is provided for you, so you can just relax and reflect on life more, enjoy the company you're in and, in turn, enjoy the food more."

At the Hotel Healdsburg, an extended evening can begin in the lobby's fireside lounge, ensconced in one of the big couches with a cold martini. Celebrity chef Charlie Palmer's Dry Creek Kitchen lies beyond, just on the other side of the breezeway.

"It's an Old World feel where you can have cocktails and little hors d'oeuvres and socialize before you sit down to the more formal part of it — the dinner," says Palmer, who partnered on the tastefully contemporary Hotel Healdsburg. "People are much more relaxed because they literally are going to walk just 50 feet to the elevator after dinner. Or they can take a stroll around the square and then come back and have a drink in the lobby. They don't have to worry about cars and driving or how much they drink or how late it is because their bed is just a few feet away." Often on weekends, the lobby crackles with live jazz.

At the Michelin-rated Madrona Manor, the whole dining

ethos is to take your time. This grand Victorian, built as a country retreat by 19th-century mining, lumber and banking mogul John Alexander Paxton, militantly sticks to a policy of not turning over tables. No one is hustled along, least of all overnight guests. The dining experience alone can stretch over two hours, concluding with a tour de force performance creating ice cream sundaes — including freezing the confection right at your table.

Hotel guests are then free to stretch out the evening with a cigar or a Cognac or brandy enjoyed on the veranda. Top off the night with a restful walk along the eight acres of woods and gardens that unfold around the mansion before retiring to comfortable rooms in the inn or elsewhere on the grounds.

A meal at Cyrus is already an extended choreographed performance. So being able to retire to the adjoining Les Mars, with its 18th- and 19th-century antique furnishings and Flemish tapestries, is like another course in the performance. Any worries about too much wine would only diminish the experience.

"This is not a place you want to drive away from," says rising-star chef Douglas Keane. "You're coming here to drink wine."

Keane said dining at Cyrus is dramatically different from Gary Danko or Jardiniere in San Francisco, where he earned his chef's stripes. Guests in the city are in a hurry to get elsewhere.

But in Wine Country, the meal is often the main event. It's food as entertainment.

In some cases, the grounds themselves are part of the attraction. Or in the case of a place like Forestville's Farmhouse Inn or Hotel Healdsburg, each with their own well-appointed spas, the experience can begin in the afternoon with a hot-stones treatment or massage.

Auberge's Curry says a superb setting is what sets a good Relais & Chateaux apart from just any upscale hotel that also happens to harbor a good restaurant.

"Our guests do get to have that experience of dining outdoors, alfresco, on our patio with that wonderful view," he says. "You kind of forget about everything else. In fact, you almost forget where you are. There is no rush. All you have to do is ask yourself, 'Boy, what are we going to do tomorrow?'" ♦



## THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

### AUBERGE DU SOLEIL

This is the original Relais & Chateaux in the Wine Country. The views of the valley from the vine-covered terrace are unsurpassed, making this a place for lingering. Rooms are cut into the hillside, off pathways lined with outdoor sculpture. \$600-\$1,000 for rooms, \$1,300-\$3,700 for suites. Restaurant open daily. 180 Rutherford Hill Road, Rutherford. 800-348-5406.

### CYRUS/LES MARS HOTEL

One might reasonably call an evening at Cyrus dinner theater; the experience of an intricately choreographed meal is truly food as cultural entertainment. If you're a guest at the adjoining Les Mars Hotel, you can extend your evening on the front end with wine and cheese served in the richly paneled library, and conclude with digestifs several hours later. 27 North St., Healdsburg. Rooms \$475-\$1,025 per night. 877-431-1700.

### DRY CREEK KITCHEN/HOTEL HEALDSBURG

Take one of the best hotels in Healdsburg and mix with one of the finest restaurants on the square, add in a fantastic lounge along with live jazz and a day spa, and you get an evening to cherish. 25 Matheson St., Healdsburg. \$260-\$790 per night for rooms. 707-431-2800. Dry Creek Kitchen is at 317 Healdsburg Ave., Healdsburg. 707-431-0330.

### EL DORADO KITCHEN/EL DORADO HOTEL

The corner location couldn't be better for taking in the Sonoma Plaza after dark. And if you don't want to venture out, you won't mind lingering over a meal designed by Executive Chef Ryan Fancher at the El Dorado Kitchen. When you're ready to turn in, you won't have far to go. The staircase to your classy, contemporary room is just outside the door. Rooms \$175-\$225 per night. 405 First St. W., Sonoma. 707-996-3220.

### FARMHOUSE INN

Country living was never so delectable. This sunny yellow farmhouse is a quiet and uncommonly exceptional getaway on your way to the wineries of the Russian River or out to the coast. The Farmhouse Inn restaurant is one of the best in the Sonoma Wine Country and after a meal slowly savored you definitely won't want to reach for your car keys. Rooms range from \$250-\$495. 7871 River Road, Forestville. 707-887-3300.

### LA TOQUE/RANCHO CAYMUS

Chef Ken Frank's prix fixe tasting menu just may seduce you to stay long into the evening at this understated but highly rated gem of a restaurant. Anticipating that, you may want to book a stay at the adjoining Rancho Caymus Inn, a series of rooms overlooking a courtyard garden complete with a lovely fountain. \$215-\$420 per night for room. 1140 Rutherford Road, Rutherford. 707-963-1777 or 800-845-1777. For La Toque, 707-963-9770.

### MADRONA MANOR

Step back and slow down to a more genteel era. No one will try to hurry you along. Your seat in the dining room adjoining Chef Jesse Malgren's renowned kitchen is yours for as long as you want to occupy it. After your meal, stroll the enchanting grounds and Malgren's kitchen garden, then retire to your choice of rooms in either the main manor house or a charming carriage house. Rooms \$210-\$525. 1001 Westside Road, Healdsburg. 800-258-4003 or 707-433-4231.

From top, Cyrus in Healdsburg, Auberge du Soleil in Rutherford, La Toque in Rutherford and Madrona Manor in Healdsburg.

