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Exploring EDK

Executive chef
and general
manager create
an atmosphere of
inspiration

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PHOTOS CRAIG SCHEINER

*A prospective diner
inspects the menu at
EDK. Maine scallops
or the cassoulet?*

*Opposite: General
Manager Jens Hoj
with Executive Chef
Ryan Fancher strike a
stairway pose in the
reinvigorated EDK.*





There's a palpable energy on the northwest corner of Sonoma Plaza: It can be tasted in the earthy, forthright flavors of roasted maitake mushrooms, beef ribeye, chorizo and clam cassoulets. It can be felt in the fresh atmosphere and sleek, undraped tables.

Call it EDK...insiders do.

Officially, it's the El Dorado Kitchen, housed at the hotel of the same name, and they both emerged in 2005 after a major two-year makeover. (Piatti was the name of EDK's predecessor.)

Gone is the establishment's old slogan, "A Place to Rest, Relax and Renew." With its younger, energetic management team, EDK is a lively place where people will want to gather. You sense it the minute

One of the largest restaurants in Sonoma with a clubby but casual atmosphere



you enter and you feel it in the handshake of the new general manager, an ebullient giant of Danish ancestry named Jens Hoj (pronounced "Yenz Hoy"). Jens is so comfortable in his own skin that everyone

around him feels at home and, fittingly, his attitude reflects in his 95 staff members.

When Craig and I arrived for an interview and photos, Jens and EDK Executive Chef Ryan Fancher insisted that we all



Top: Chef Fancher at home in the kitchen.

Bottom: The Fireplace Lounge also serves as a dining room.

Maine diver scallops

with shellfish nage, tourneed baby vegetables and parsley-infused olive oil

Serves 4

12 scallops	1 onion	1 tablespoon parsley oil
1 pound mussels	1 bunch parsley	4 liters fish fumé
1 pound clams	1 fennel bulb	4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
12 baby carrots	2 shallots	1 liter white wine
12 Tokyo turnips	1 head garlic	1 bunch fennel fronds for garnish
12 red pearl onions	1 bunch tarragon	
1 rib of celery	1 tablespoon butter	

Nage: Sweat the fennel, onion, shallot and garlic in about two tablespoons olive oil until translucent. Add the clams, mussels and white wine. Reduce wine, then add fish fumé. After simmering for one hour, add tarragon, parsley and fennel. Simmer for 15 minutes and strain.

Vegetables: Peel the carrots, turnips, celery and pearl onions. Blanch until soft in boiling salted water. After they are cooked thoroughly, cool and reserve.

Scallops: With two tablespoons olive oil, brown the scallops in a hot sauté pan but do not overcook. They should be cooked medium-rare to medium.

To assemble: In a medium saucepot, bring the shellfish broth to a boil. Whisk in one tablespoon of unsalted butter. Add the vegetables to the broth to warm them. Place the scallops in a warm bowl, arrange the vegetables around them and spoon in a little broth. Garnish with parsley oil, fennel fronds and other fresh herbs.

— EDK Executive Chef Ryan Fancher



“I thought, if it works, it would be great. If it doesn’t, I’d find something else.”
– Ryan Fancher

Moises Tun, chef de partie, with typical fare: “elegant, a little sophisticated, but not pretentious.”

share a meal. They led us over to a table in a spacious, sunny alcove by the garden patio.

Choosing from the lunch menu’s long list of tempting offerings wasn’t easy, but eventually we decided on a Cobb salad, a chorizo and clam cassoulet, pan-seared scallops, parmesan dumplings and, to share, a fried artichoke appetizer.

EDK, one of the largest restaurants in Sonoma, has been reinvigorated with a clubby but casual atmosphere. The kitchen is open so everyone can watch the choreography of the chefs and cooks.

Chef Ryan’s enthusiasm for his work equals that of Jens; as they spoke, their words effused idealism, energy and passion. Their goal is to make EDK the restaurant of choice for both savvy local diners and for visitors to the Valley.

“We want to under-promise and over-produce,” said Ryan. “We want our food to be elegant, a little sophisticated, but not

pretentious.”

As though to make that point, the fried artichoke appetizer arrived: a platter heaped with deconstructed baby artichokes, carrots and lemon slices, accompanied by a side of citrus aioli. I began to spear a lemon slice with my fork when Ryan’s hand shot out to intervene. Laughing, he instructed, “Just grab ‘em with your fingers. It’s easier.”

We all dug into the amazing flavors as these two dynamic men shared their philosophies, their backgrounds and dreams. They talked about inspiration, motivation, teamwork and about building a sense of family. They also shared personal stories of how they got started in the business.

Ryan grew up in Santa Barbara. When he was 15, he landed a weekend job in a local steak house, cleaning bathrooms and swabbing down the grill. Later on, he was

continued on page 122

"promoted" to dishwasher, but on his first day the dishes stacked up faster than he could wash them.

"I looked like the classic cartoon," he said, "forlorn in the midst of stacks of dirty dishes, pots and pans." The following weekend, vowing to do better, he put in what he described as "a heroic night" and kept ahead of the dirty dishes. His appreciative boss took notice and asked Ryan what he wanted to do. "Cook!" was Ryan's immediate and unequivocal answer.

And cook he has ever since, eventually becoming sous-chef at the prestigious French Laundry. Ryan happened to be working for Auberge du Soleil in Rutherford when, two years ago, a friend told him that EDK was looking for an executive chef.

"It was an opportunity," he mused, lifting a clam from the cassoulet to his mouth. "I knew it was going to be tough - a big house opening in the midst of the high season. But I thought, if it works, it would be great. If it doesn't, I'd find something else."

Bearing that attitude of adventure and risk, Ryan Fancher arrived at EDK to help prepare for the grand opening on June 3, 2005. The first year was rough, he confided, with a lot of mistakes. But when Jens came in to manage the front of the house, everything smoothed out, he said. It's been great ever since.

Jens grew up in Marin County, as son of the executive chef of San Francisco's St. Francis Yacht Club and the Bohemian Club. Sipping his iced tea, Jens reminisced about the day his dad had to make dinner for 800 people and asked Jens to crack some eggs.

"He sat me down in the cooler in front of 15 cases of eggs and, as he was leaving, said 'And don't get any shells in it,'" said Jens. "I was petrified. My dad was so stern. And do you know how many eggs are in 15 cases? A case is eight flats and each flat has 32 eggs. That's 3,840 eggs!"

"I stayed there for three solid hours and cracked eggs." A little smile crept over his face. "No shells got in, either."

Jens attended culinary school at San Francisco State University and has been in

the hospitality industry ever since.

"I have a very different management style from my father. He was educated in France, the old school, very authoritarian," he said. "The people on my staff know I trust and believe in them."

"This," he said, making a sweeping gesture with his arm across EDK and the hotel, "is the most creative thing in my life. I have the responsibility for the whole property and to make sure that everybody is heading in the right direction. If we want to make a change, we just do it. Corporate gives us free rein."

When I asked Jens and Ryan what EDK's signature dish might be, they both predicted they may never have one, simply because they want their menu to constantly evolve with new and unique things.

"We will always have the basic categories on the menu," said Ryan. "There will always be a beef something; there will always be pasta, poultry, pork and lamb, but we are always presenting new dishes and encourage all our staff to participate in finding new recipes, or new versions of old favorites."

"Take this cassoulet, for example," he said, pointing to the steaming bowl of spicy sausages and beans surrounded by tiny clams. "These are heirloom beans that will hold their shape and texture." He deftly forked one and put it on my plate to illustrate his point.

"The sausage is made from scratch. Rafael Molina, one of our chefs who created this dish, personally selects all the ingredients that go into it. He's very invested in this and that's the kind of involvement we want from everybody on our staff," said Ryan.

"What we're trying to foster here is an inspiring work atmosphere so that people really want to come to work," added Jens. "And it isn't just the chefs. The bartenders make up unique drinks; the servers find ways to describe the food on the menu. Everybody is encouraged to show some initiative."

The atmosphere in EDK is welcoming. The tables are informal, not covered with linens. Tables for two or four surround a 40-foot-long communal table, flanked by

EDK, continued from page 123

20 high-backed chairs. An architectural gem, the table was built from recycled wood culled from a 200-year-old bridge in Montgomery, Vermont.

The 27 rooms in the hotel are all getting face-lifts, too, with new paint, fixtures and carpets. The building's separate corner retail space, which used to house an art and jewelry shop, will soon transform into a café and market where customers can buy EDK's special pastries.

Jens and Ryan are doing their best to be good neighbors and members of the Sonoma community. They buy everything they can from local vendors like the Patch and Sonoma Organics. Their fresh fish comes from Bodega Bay. Their mushrooms are right off the Sonoma hills.

"A really good restaurant doesn't just make good food," said Jens, "but is passionate about being part of the community."

Last Christmas, EDK adopted a family through the Sonoma Valley Mentoring

Alliance. The staff not only contributed money to buy presents for all five people in the family, they also went to their home on Christmas Eve and cooked a sumptuous dinner.

"Everybody felt so good about it that we decided we would do it all over again next Christmas, except for, maybe, 10 families," Jens said with a happy grin.

So can these two men, with all their energy, keep up the innovation and pace they have set for themselves and EDK? After eating their delicious lunch and hearing their fervent convictions, I have no doubt. They are so clear on their goal - to have a place that serves astonishing meals and encourages conversation.

They said, "This is your home for a meal. This is where you can talk and share a meal and there is something sacred about that."

The El Dorado Kitchen is located at 405 First Street West on the Sonoma Plaza. Call 707.996.3220 or go to www.hoteleldorado.com.