

# Cognoscenti magazine

Because life is short

## Fairmont Sonoma Inn and Spa Sonoma, California

Relaxation: that's largely what Fairmont Mission Sonoma is about. Enter these beautifully maintained grounds and you enter a more leisured world. Sure, there are weddings and conferences and meetings—but when you're doing nothing more than lounging around the quiet, garden-fringed swimming pool, it's hard feeling *too* pressed for time.

The guestroom occupied by visiting **Cognoscenti Magazine** editors on their recent visit was one of 226 guestrooms, including 60 recently remodeled suites. The room was decorated in a style perhaps best described as “gracious.” Restrained green and red tones dominate, while a sofa, recliner, desk, and two tables fill the space—leaving things a little crowded in spite of the room's generous square footage. We liked the beige marble fireplace and the array of dimmers that could be set to control track lights, chandeliers and table lamps, making it possible to create a variety of lighting moods.

One glance at the amenity-packed living/sleeping area, another at the spa-like bathroom, and the tired traveler is apt to think: Why don't I warm up some essential oils, take a soak in that oversized Jacuzzi, and then wrap up in one of those extra-fluffy towels? Move over to the couch, pick a bottle of sparkling from the mini-bar, slip a CD into the stereo and light a fire...

Though only an hour or two out of San Francisco, the resort offers a genuine resort experience. The Fairmont Sonoma Mission's 43,000 square foot indoor and outdoor spa is fed by its own thermal mineral water source. Treatments on offer include a Caviar Facial and hot stone therapy. (Hint: there's also a dedi-



*The Watsu Pool at night*

cated Watsu pool. For those who've never tried Watsu, *do!*)

Ah, so the hotel's really nice...but what about the food? After all, dining has been the Achilles' Heel for more than one fine hotel. We found food to be a strong point at the Fairmont Mission Sonoma, not a weak one—case in point: our dinner at **Santé**, the resort's signature restaurant.

Inside Santé, display jeroboams of famous wines add festivity, and high-backed wooden chairs contribute an element of slight rusticity to the otherwise elegant surroundings. Only the chunky overhead wrought iron lamps strike a false decorative note with their oppressive, baronial feel.

Here, Executive Chef Bruno Tison and Chef de Cuisine Rod Williams serve a *prix fixe* menu offering either three or four courses. The menu is reasonably priced for what it is. Formerly of the Plaza New York,

Chef Tison has also trained with one of our special favorites, Roger Vergé. [See **Cognoscenti Magazine's 2003 review of M. Vergé's *Moulin de Mougins*.**]

In the course of our meal, the chefs revealed an instinctive sense of which flavors, textures and colors complement each other on the plate. Indeed the kitchen proved a fount of creative menu ideas. And while these chefs source locally whenever possible, the culinary influences evidenced on our table ranged much farther afield. South of the Border reflections ran the gamut from *chipotle* to *ceviche*-like concoctions—like the Point Reyes oysters margarita that the guy over at the next table was busily slurping down. Ever had instant jealousy over what the person at the *next* table was being served? We did, just then.



*The Wine Room*

But when our dishes arrived at table, we had little cause for regret over what we had ordered. Butternut and acorn squash ravioli with sweet and sour pear emulsion, wilted arugula and spicy pecans was very nice, creamy without being heavy. Clay-oven roasted prawns were outstanding, as was the Dungeness crab couscous, mango, *frisée*, and cilantro yogurt accompaniment. It's in the best tradition of California fusion cuisine: coax intense flavor from the freshest of ingredients without sacrificing the health of the diner.

Only in the pan roasted Alaskan halibut and leek *confit* were flavors less carefully delineated. The almost stark contrapuntal elegance of the earlier dishes was absent, replaced by the bland sensation of encountering mushy texture.

Service was highly professional. By this we mean more than just that the staff served well; they genuinely

seemed to share the guests' pleasure at the fine food and drink.

Feeling slightly embarrassed for not more deeply probing the depths of the 400+ selections wine card, we drank *Veuve Cliquot* with every course and finished with a 1962 *Cerbois* Bas Armagnac. Bottled only in 2002, this viscous bellywarmer shows medium brown in color. It is currently very approachable with the rounded aspect of age. Present are the *richesse* of thickened caramel along with the tang of orange zest and just a hint of something deeper, like prune.

All in all, our most impressive culinary experience in the valley in quite some time!

With bright morning sunshine streaming through the tall windows, breakfast at Santé has a very different feel from dinner. The experience is as enjoyable, with a lavish buffet to choose from and eggs cooked exactly to order—a favored spot for the power breakfast, Sonoma-style.

This article was written by Jeffrey Riggs, Senior Contributing Editor to *Cognoscenti Magazine*. Photos courtesy of Fairmont Hotels & Resorts.

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