

Cognoscenti magazine

Because life is short

MARY ELAINE'S At the Phoenician Resort Scottsdale, Arizona

Eager anticipation is perhaps the best way to describe our attitude before dining at **Mary Elaine's**, a restaurant long considered one of America's finest. But would the experience match our keen expectations?



Haute Cuisine in an extraordinary setting

The décor is old-style classicist, with plenty of ovals in the design. Flickering candlelight is reflected against the windows at night, mingling indistinctly with the glittering lights of downtown Phoenix. Perhaps the ceilings are too low for an establishment of this caliber—or do they merely add to the intimacy, when a smoky-voiced *chanteuse* appears along with a pianist to perform jazzy lounge standards like “Cheek to Cheek”?

We began our libations with a half bottle of Krug NV. Served in crystal flutes, it displayed pronounced hazelnut character along with the substantial depth and finish for which this top-flight Champagne is often noted.

An amuse-bouche of *rouget* with *escabèche* was served cold; presented even before the menu was brought, it came as a thoughtful introductory touch. The second amuse-bouche was an absolutely exceptional Jerusalem artichoke soup served in a *demi-tasse* with black truffle.

On the evening **Cognoscenti Magazine** editors visited, Mary Elaine's was offering an extraordinary tasting menu, one that few restaurants in America would—or even could—dare put on the card: a white and black truffle tasting menu, featuring these scrumptious delights in each of five special courses. One of us chose this, while the other went with the Chef's Selection tasting menu.

Master Sommelier Greg Tresner—one of fewer than a hundred in the world to sport this most esteemed of designations—started pouring for us what would be a series of extraordinary wines. First came glasses of 2000 Sancerre, La Grande Côte, from one of that appellation's finest producers, *François Cotat*. It struck dual notes of soprano and bass, revealing a floral bouquet along with a rich and chalky body.

The mascarpone risotto (which the chef prepared with bone marrow rather than butter) yielded an inconceivably rich concoction to which white Alba truffles, shaved at table by our attentive table captain, took deliriously.

The wines were matching the opulence: a bottle of 1998 *Vincent Girardin* Corton Charlemagne revealed

the virtues of its blessed *terroir*, with superb minerality, restraint and finish. (True, we were only scratching the surface of Mary Elaine's incredible 45,000-bottle collection—but what a surface.)

In the sautéed wild turbot with salad of almond, truffle, romaine and black truffle-lobster emulsion, the turbo came off a bit salty; to our way of thinking, coarse salt crystals on fish, as were apparently used here, hardly ever improve a dish. A Hudson Valley *foie gras* was served with a 100-year old balsamic, the vinegar as fine as old wine, pungent and mellow.

The evening's wine climax came in the form of a decanted bottle of 1994 Gevrey-Chambertin "Clos St Jacques" by *Domaine Armand Rousseau Père & Fils*. From a vintage of rather poor quality, this 1994 was rounded and fully mature, its ruby color fading towards orange around the edges. Although the fruit wasn't particularly well concentrated, the complexity was certainly there: sipping this wine was like observing a performance on a stage in which different dancers come and go: first there's pepper, then ripe fruit, and then it was on to a lingering finish.

There followed a Jamison Farms lamb "trois façons" with crispy pastry and olive-lamb jus; we found the pastry ever so slightly too crispy. Aged prime rib eye with creamed spinach, petite carrot and *sauce périgueux* was impeccable in every way.

For dessert, truffles reappeared yet one more time (yes!) with a delicious chocolate tart. As the last of these delectable morsels marked the end of our feast, we decided that Mary Elaine's truffle tasting menu was not only a daring and well executed conception, but also a superb venue for illustrating all the ways that truffles can enhance the flavors of everything from a seafood appetizer to a dessert.

In an exclusive interview with visiting **Cognoscenti Magazine** editors, Chef Bradford Thompson told how he feels engaged in "a process of education in developing guest tastes." He sees the meal as a series of contrasts, a "progression from light to dark, from simple to complex."

Does Brad ever fret that his culinary creations might be overshadowed by the incredible wines that are being uncorked by the staff of skilled sommeliers? He laughs at this suggestion, shrugging and saying modestly, "Sometimes the food is the focus, sometimes the wine, and you must let your ego get to the side."

The kitchen's effort to tantalize the tastes of Mary Elaine's diners is continuous: "We don't rest content with what we've achieved. I like the challenge myself to see how many things I can do from a simple dish, to see how many flavors I can coax out of each ingredient." He wants his guests to say, "Wow, that was more than I thought it could be."

And what do *we* say about Mary Elaine's? This is a place where precious truffles are as commonplace as potatoes are elsewhere; where even a ladies' pocketbook gets its own fabric stool; where there are no fewer than *five* sommeliers; where the menu and the wine list are exactly as deep and as vast as your imagination—and your pocketbook—permit. Mary Elaine's is a fabulous island of luxury, and dining there is an experience that discerning gourmets shouldn't pass up.

This article was written by Jeffrey Riggs and Nicole Medvecky-Riggs, Contributing Editors to *Cognoscenti Magazine*. Photo courtesy of *The Phoenician Resort*.

© 2003 Cognoscenti Magazine

Mary Elaine's

The Phoenician Resort
6000 East Camelback Road
Scottsdale, Arizona 85251
Ph: (480) 941-8200
www.thephoenician.com