



PRESS DEMOCRAT GIVES CYRUS RESTAURANT FOUR STARS

Jeff Cox Review

April 24, 2005

Cyrus, the restaurant in the new Les Mars Hotel in Healdsburg, sets a new standard for luxury dining in Sonoma County.

Owners Nick Peyton, the very accommodating maitre d', and Doug Keane, the chef, learned how to do it right at high-end San Francisco venues such as Masa's, the Ritz-Carlton, Jardiniere and Restaurant Gary Danko. They also own and operate the popular Market in St. Helena.

But Cyrus is some sort of pinnacle for them -- and for us, too.

The dining room is very posh, with vaulted ceilings, colors in muted earth tones, indirect lighting, and amazingly beautiful photographs by Andy Katz of scenes from wine countries near and far, like the Alexander Valley, Burgundy and Tuscany. The restaurant is named for Cyrus Alexander, an early settler who in 1846 planted the first vineyard in the verdant valley now named for him.

Scads of wait staff perform impeccable service, all of them knowledgeable. At one point in the dinner, I asked the young woman who was refilling our water glasses about the composition of a dish, expecting her to go ask one of the waiters, but she deconstructed all the ingredients for me without hesitation. In very few restaurants will the water person know all about the dishes being served.

Sommelier Jason Alexander put together the 32-page, 600-bottle wine list that includes bottles from around the world, ranging in price from the modest to the fabulous. The emphasis on this list is Sonoma County, however. Our party of four chose a Chateauneuf-du-Pape in the \$60 range, but the bottle ran out before the dinner was over, so we asked for the wine book back and discovered a grand selection of half bottles. We stayed with Chateauneuf for our half bottle. The first bottle had the unpleasant smell of cork taint, the detection of which is one of the chief reasons you are poured a bit of a new bottle to evaluate. I simply smell the wine. If it smells good, it's unlikely to be "off" in any way. In this case, the sommelier instantly replaced it with another, which was clean.

The kitchen sends out a series of little temptations before and even during the dinner. The first was a mushroom duxelle followed by red snapper ceviche with candied kumquat and olive tapenade. After a bit, out came stone crab claws with a ramps coulis (ramps are a delicious type of onion that grows wild across the northeastern states and Appalachia). Yet another "mouth-pleaser," as the French call these tidbits, was a small Olympia oyster topped with California paddlefish caviar and set atop a cylinder of ice in which red and black peppercorns were frozen, accompanied by a spectacular chilled oyster velouté.

A word about the menu and ordering. A seven-course chef's tasting menu is available for \$85, or \$132 if each course is paired with a wine, but it's much more fun to order off the regular menu in any one of eight categories: soups and salads, foie gras, pasta, vegetables, fish and shellfish, meat and poultry, cheeses and desserts. Three courses cost \$52; four, \$63, and five, \$74. Four of us each had three courses and that bottle and a half of wine. Add the 20-percent tip and it came to about \$100 a person.

Any item in any category can be served as an appetizer-sized portion or a main-dish portion. Not that you would, but you could make seared foie gras your main portion supplemented with foie gras terrine and a salt-cured torchon -- foie gras marinated in cognac, then cured in salt and wrapped in cloth with the ends tied so the liver is cylindrical, then simmered in the marinade with added chicken stock until the liver is heated through, then unwrapped and cut into slices.

Here's some of what our table had:

Tamarind-Glazed Duck Confit (3 stars) is a nifty flavor combination -- the tamarind glazing and sweet, rich duck complement each other. Julienned daikon radish, bits of sweet dates, and a mound of perfect tat-soi with sweet and sour dressing completed the plate.

Crab Ravioli (3.5 stars) with a Banyuls (sweet white wine of southern France) reduction sauce and fines herbes (chives, parsley, chervil, and tarragon) was delectable but over-salted -- the reason why this dish was marked down. I'm not opposed to the use of salt, but when salt is the predominant flavor or taste component, something's amiss.

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Artichokes a la "Barigoule" (3.5 stars) is a deliciously creative take on a standard artichoke-heart stew. Not only does the dish contain stewed artichoke hearts, but it also features tempura slices of artichoke hearts and all is paired with fava beans out of their pods and jackets, lovely mushrooms, and baby carrots.

Ragout of Spring Peas and Radish (4 stars) brings these early vegetables together with a ramps-flavored, foamy emulsion. The peas are two kinds: English (or garden) peas and snap peas, and the radishes are red and white French Breakfast and round white Tokyo Cross, a small turnip that functions as a high-quality white radish. Sprouts helped out, although in discussing this dish, we thought it would have been nicer to have steamed pea shoot tips instead of sprouts.

Then came a short intermezzo. What looked like lollipops were actually rounds of juniper-and-hibiscus-flavored granita -- a palate-refreshing ice.

Seared Kampachi and Tuna Tartare (4 stars) got us back up to speed in a first-class Japanese way. This amazing assembly of luscious ingredients -- the seared fish, the ground raw tuna -- paired with sharp black radish and mild celery root was enhanced by a soy sauce, lemon and truffle vinaigrette.

Thai Marinated Lobster (4 stars) was exquisite. The ginger, garlic and cilantro marinade enveloped the lobster, and avocado, mango and hearts of palm continued the tropical theme.

Scallops with Cauliflower Cream (3 stars) is another nifty idea, and was given depth by an emulsion made from uni (sea urchin) and Meyer lemon.

Black Sea Bass (3.5 stars) paired a perfect piece of fish with lots of goodies, like baby bok choy, shiitake caps, pickled watermelon rind and a broth made with dried scallops.

Cold Strawberry Souffle (4 stars) wasn't a cooked dish, but a light, airy, floating wisp of pure strawberry flavor. I wish more desserts were like this delicate treat.

Caramel Soup (2 stars) with popcorn sorbet and chocolate filigree was just plain weird. I'm glad more desserts aren't like this.

To sum up: Not only is Doug Keane's food as fancy as the restaurant and the hotel it's in, it's also very good, and in some cases great. You can see the thought and work he's put into his creations, and you can taste it, too.

While a couple of dishes needed improvement, Cyrus has only been open for about six weeks. I know Keane's cooking from Jardiniere in San Francisco and Market in St. Helena, and I am sure that before long, everything will be drawn up to four-star level. So despite the few dings, I'm convinced we have an extraordinary new restaurant in Sonoma County.

Jeff Cox writes a weekly restaurant review column for Q. You can reach him at jeffcox@sonic.net.

Overall:

Price: \$\$\$\$

Ambiance:

Food:

Service:

Wine List:

Kid-friendliness: Not rated