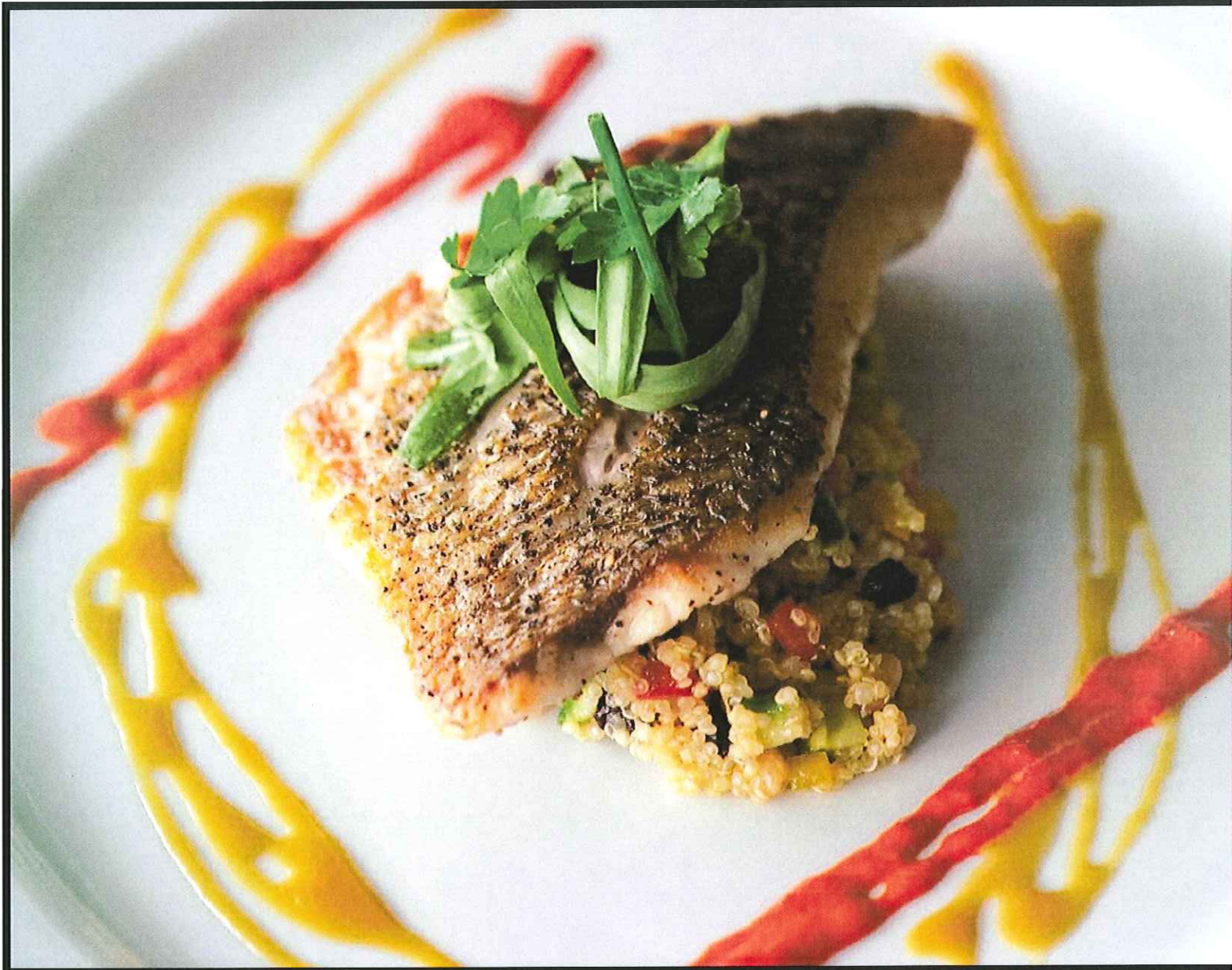


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Taste of the Town



Attitude Adjustment

BY DERK RICHARDSON PHOTOGRAPHY LORI EANES

Meritage at the Claremont Ups the Ante for Hotel Dining

When I was a kid, dining in a hotel carried with it a certain sense of privilege and grandeur. That's because my family rarely did it, and when we did, we did it up big, for special-occasion brunches at the Garden Court in the Palace Hotel in downtown San Francisco. My grandmother in Reno took me a few times to the Mapes and the Riverside hotels, catty-corner to each other →



across the Truckee River, evoking images of high-rolling gamblers and movie stars, including Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable, who stayed at the Mapes during the filming of *The Misfits*.

But the romance faded over the years. Except for such intimate, rustic, out-of-the-way spots as the Union Hotel in Benicia or the Hotel Mac in Point Richmond, I came to think of hotel food as upgraded coffee shop fare at a Holiday Inn, gussied up spins on “continental” cuisine, and the cirque de celebrity chef scene in Las Vegas. To my great surprise, Meritage at the Claremont has caused me to readjust my attitude.

Meritage opened in early December in the Claremont Hotel Club & Spa. It took the place of Jordan’s, but the remodeling of the entry bar/lounge and the dining areas is one of those makeovers that obliterates almost all traces of the prior occupant while harking back to an idealized past and staking claim to a revitalized present. The 95-year-old hotel’s classic lines – high ceilings, arched passageways, stately columns – have been accented and updated with a soothing pale color scheme, rich carpets, mirrored walls, low-back rattan chairs, pinpoint down-lighting, delicate chandeliers and wall lamps, and candles on the tables dressed in white linens. It’s an elegant but not ostentatious look that

doesn’t compete with the spectacular Berkeley, Bay and bridge-facing view out the northwest wall of windows.

The ambiance was low key for our weeknight visit during the post-holidays lull in early January. Two couples were ensconced at the mahogany bar, which offers a small plates and “bites” menu of tuna tartare, risotto arancini, shrimp tacos, Kobe beef mini burgers, onion rings and more. A few folks were kicking back in the tall comfy chairs in the lounge, where the piano was tinkling out standards and pop tunes on disc-player mode. And the dining room was about half full, with all the tables along the wall of windows occupied by parties quietly enjoying the glittering wintry panorama of palms and city lights.

The calm setting was an agreeable contrast to the bustle and clamor of so many new and hip East Bay bistros. It may have also contributed to the pleasant and gracefully timed service we enjoyed from start to finish. It certainly allowed us to take our time and savor the conceptual “wine-driven” “farm-to-table” approach, originated by Daniel Bruce at a Meritage in Boston, established also in New Orleans, and tailored here by executive chef Josh Thomsen.

Impressively credentialed (the Hotel Bel-Air, the French Laundry, Michael Mina’s Nobhill Tavern) and with the kind of Bobby Flay/Tyler Florence looks and bearing that could land him on TV,



Thomsen oversees a menu that should be too clever (and too eclectic) by half, but which turns out to be both smart and satisfying. Offerings are categorized by the types of wines they are paired with: sparklers, light and fruity whites, full-bodied whites, fruity reds, spicy/earthy reds and full-bodied reds. You can order any dish, from the Hog Island oysters and the baby iceberg “wedge” salad to Atlantic salmon or filet mignon, as a small or large plate, and any of the paired wines by the half or full glass.

We kicked things off with a tall pineapple mojito (\$12), which Robin found a bit too fruity, and a Sazerac (\$10), which came on the rocks though I’d ordered it neat, and three small plates as starters: a perfect Dungeness crab cake (\$14) that was packed with sweet crab meat and topped with pretty frills of shaved celery and radish; Castroville artichoke soup with roasted tomato (\$7), served in a ladle-like metal bowl with a long, curlicue handle, and accompanied by a fried artichoke heart pierced with a crispy prosciutto chip; and a gorgeous Sonoma goat cheese-potato terrine (\$9) plated with baby beets and aged balsamic syrup. In every case, the dishes tasted even better than they looked, and they looked fabulous.

The same went for the small plates we combined as a shared main course: roasted





At Meritage at the Claremont, the food — including the Pacific striped bass (opening page) and ahi tuna tartare (previous page, upper right) — tastes better than it looks, which is amazing. That tantalizing dessert (previous page, upper left) is the TCHO Pier 17 Chocolate Tasting. The revitalized dining room has a quiet but grand ambiance, perfect for Chef Josh Thomsen's (this page) smart and satisfying menu. The cider-braised Kurobuta pork belly (above) is something to remember.

butternut squash and chestnut ravioli (\$11) with lots of diced squash and chestnuts piled into the sauce; cider-braised Kurobuta pork belly (\$11) in three luscious slices swarmed by black-eyed peas, topped with roasted Brussels sprouts leaves and pickled onions; and breathtakingly tender Red Bluff Kobe beef short ribs (\$13) on a bed of fingerling potatoes in a pool of inky balsamic reduction and garnished with carved knobs of heirloom carrot and crisp ribbons of fried parsnip. These ample “half” portions were presented regally on full-sized white plates, bowls and platters. We chose half glasses of La Crema Pinot Noir and Coppola Zinfandel (\$7 each) from the fruity and full-bodied reds. They

paired well, and the generous pours lasted through the course and into the superb croissant bread pudding with eggnog gelato (\$9).
The meal was so satisfying on every level that we can easily imagine returning to cobble together entirely different dinners of smoked salmon carpaccio, handmade lobster ravioli, seared sea scallops, cioppino, loin of lamb, Medjool date cake, vanilla crème brûlée and the wide range of seemingly well-priced (mostly northern California) wines. I’m even beginning to rethink my balking at the \$56 adult price for brunch (\$25 for kids). That’s how grand and flush a relaxed night at Meritage made us feel.

Meritage at the Claremont.
California. Serves breakfast 6:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. Monday through Saturday and 6:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. Sunday; brunch 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Sunday; lunch 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday; dinner 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, lounge 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. Monday through Saturday. 41 Tunnel Road, Berkeley, (510) 549-8510, meritageclaremont.com. CCY ☎ ☎ \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$