
Metropolitan Mecca

San Francisco Bay's Claremont Hotel is a sublimely serene retreat.

QRW STAFF



Chef Josh Thomsen

San Francisco has its hotels on a hill, and fine properties like The Ritz-Carlton still embellish the Nob Hill section. But for us the city and its hills are sometimes best seen from afar — reasonably close, reasonably personal, yet distant enough to view with quiet awe the scope and horizontal beauty of the Bay area and the Golden Gate Bridge. The Claremont Hotel in Berkeley Hills offers this. It's a countryside resort that sits elegantly on 22-acres, looking like an English manor house surrounded by Edenic gardens. The ride from the city is only about 15 minutes, yet far enough like a retreat for those who feel the world is too much with them. It's where Greta Garbo escaped, where John Barrymore relaxed, where fussy Frank Lloyd Wright went and later praised for its "warmth, charm, and character." The Claremont is a Mecca within a metropolis.

The property is nearly a century old and was recently renovated and re-opened in December, 2009 by the Pyramid Hotel Group of Boston, who runs 40 properties, like the exclusive five-star Boston Harbor Hotel and the Maison Dupuy

in New Orleans. The place is quietly grand, modestly opulent, and serenely understated. It's somewhat large (279 rooms and 17 suites) but doesn't feel it. Many of the smartly appointed rooms have views of the city, and a stay at The Claremont offers its guests the Spa Claremont, with its enormous treatment area — 32 rooms — and The Club at The Claremont, a private club in the East Bay area, with resort amenities, massage, aquatics, fitness area, and earnest tennis.

The view from the restaurant, The Meritage, is another attraction, with large windows and impressive vistas. Sumptuous food emerges from the restaurant's kitchens, where executive chef Josh Thomsen (formerly of The French Laundry, Hotel Bel Air, and Michael Mina's Las Vegas Nobhill Tavern) oversees matters. Dining in San Francisco has to be excellent if only because the culinary competition is so fiercely keen. The Meritage delivers. And it does so in an interesting manner, based on menus made notable by Chef Daniel Bruce of the Meritage restaurant at the Boston Harbor Hotel and at

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the Le Meritage at Maison Dupuy in New Orleans, upon which Chef Thomsen's is modeled. The menu is simply divided into two wine sections (one for white, the other red) followed by a listing of the wine's style — full-bodied, spicy, light, sparkling, etc. Underneath each wine style there are three dining menu selections with appropriate suggested wine pairings. You read the menu horizontally. For example, if you want a "full-bodied red" wine, Chef Thomsen offers three choices: California Lamb "Tagine" with couscous and black mission figs comes with a 2006 Twomey Merlot; Red Bluff Braised Short Ribs arrives with a 2006 Newton Cabernet Sauvignon; Filet Mignon "Rossini" with Hudson Valley foie gras comes with a 2005 Cain Concept

Meritage. Such pairing is a courtesy that rarely goes unnoticed because many diners don't want the agony and guess work of pairing wines with their meals. And yet, if you like reading and studying wine lists and doing the pairing, The Meritage's list will not be wanting. In fact, it's serious reading.

Thus, a dining statement is made at the restaurant: wine and food are important and integral and beautifully paired. Even the most seasoned wine aficionado would be wise to follow Chef Thomsen's advice because the pairings are knowing and at the very heart of his dining experience. Wine selections, moreover, come from the best of vintages, and nothing at The Meritage is less than first-rate. Of course, the choice is optional, as are the

food portions: diners can select small plate or large plate dishes, with wines by the glass, allowing, in effect, both for a mini *degustation* of the menu, or for a more traditional eating experience. Dress, needless to say, is California casual. A further interesting aspect is that Meritage works with local growers and purveyors (farm to table), which is hardly in itself unique; however, what is interesting is Chef Thomsen's "Vineyard to Table" series, where only local foods are paired with only local wines, and major Napa wineries like Cakebread, Cliff Lede, Far Niente, and Trefethen have signed on. "Vineyard to Table" is rather like a local food and fine wine festival celebrating the bounty of the region at a very celebrated hotel. ☩