

The Mayne Menu: FARM at Carneros Resort: Kandinsky on a plate

TRACY J. MAYNE Dec 23, 2024 Updated Dec 23, 2024 0

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FARM Restaurant at Carneros Resort has a renovated dining room.

Tracy J. Mayne photo

Pre-COVID, FARM at Carneros was a regular stop for date night. With innovative featured seasonal ingredient tasting menus (peach, asparagus, cherry...), we looked forward to each monthly rotation. During the pandemic the restaurant closed to non-resort guests, and afterwards a series of chefs cycled through, none attaining the pre-pandemic level of cuisine (including James Beard award winner Chris Biance). A recent renovation brought with it the promotion of Chase Immel to Chef du cuisine. In the last six months he has brought his own imprimatur to the menu and it is a very welcome refresh.

The renovation created a high end modern western space, semi-formal, warm and welcoming. It includes both indoor and outdoor seating, the latter overlooking the well-manicured grounds. An adjoining outdoor bar frequently features performers who can be enjoyed seated around inviting fire pits. It's refined without being stuffy.



We ordered the tuna carpaccio to start. It was visually appealing, rather like a Kandinsky painting with a mix of curved and angular motifs overlaid across the soft pastel of the tuna. The flavors and textures were very much in kind: the tuna was fresh and whisper thin, the fired capers crunchy and with the olives brought the requisite saltiness. Sunchoke chips added additional crispness, and the spotting of Calabrian chili oil the slightest bit of heat. It was the combination of simple but fresh and well-curated ingredients, reminiscent of many a meal in Italy, that made the dish come alive.

For our pasta course we ordered the honeypatch ravioli and Gnocci cacio e pepe. The presentation of the ravioli was thoughtful and appealing. The ravioli itself was perfectly al dente, the brown butter and sage rich and savory, the parmigiano-reggiano light and creamy. The pine nuts brought depth and texture to the soffrito. Once again, it was a well-orchestrated rondellet of flavors. The gnocchi was impossibly light, cloudlike, in an equally light cream sauce topped with breadcrumbs and pecorino. Here again, the chef juxtaposed contrasting flavors and textures to achieve perfect balance.

For our main course we ordered a medium rare Brandt Ranch NY strip, the lobster risotto and a side of roasted pumpkin. Readers know I am unforgiving when it comes to steak — anything less than perfection will be noted and garner a demerit. I could find no flaw in this dish (and I came back a second time to ensure consistency and again could not find exception). The steak arrived a perfect medium rare, caramelized outside (not grilled or charred), the bruleed cippolini and sauteed chantarelles not simply an accompaniment but an integral part of the dish. When included on the fork with the steak, each bite sang with layers of umami. The potatoes aligot were, like the gnocchi, light and creamy. While some may prefer the denser, stringy version of aligot, this rendition was the right one for the overall dish, especially with the accompanying rich au jus.

The lobster risotto — we ordered the half size portion — had a more than generous topping of lobster meat, a superior choice to the chopped mixed-in bits one finds in other restaurants. The risotto was that hard-to-achieve creamy and tender that has brought down many a contestant on Top Chef. I was dubious of the inclusion of dill and lemon, seemingly more suited to a summer lobster roll than risotto, but I was wrong. The acid and freshness brought the dish alive (I plan to steal the idea and try it at home).

The roasted pumpkin, like the other dishes, was innovative with unexpected twists. I anticipated the sweet savoriness of the pumpkin, especially with the addition of honey, but there was a surprising tanginess brought by a secret ingredient not listed on the menu. With contrasting silky whipped mascarpone and crunchy pumpkin seed crumble, it again brought to mind a Kandinsky painting, combining the soft and angular in a way that somehow comes together to create a coordinated whole. The chef threw in complimentary fried brussels sprouts. Crisp and tender, the pecan and pecan vinaigrette brought the right acid balance.

The prices are average for Napa, with salad/appetizers ranging from \$15 to \$26 (the exception being a dozen oysters for \$40). Pasta ranges from \$22 to \$32 (the exception being the full-size lobster risotto at \$55). Entrees, with sides ordered separately, run \$38 to \$56 (the exception being the eggplant parmesan at \$28). Sides are \$15 to \$18 and desserts \$9 to \$16.

Restaurants need to reinvent themselves to stay fresh and engaging. Recent reviews of Ad Hoc and French Laundry are cautionary tales that even three-star restaurants can become lax and stale. FARM has reemerged from its renovation rejuvenated in both look and cuisine. If you haven't gone recently, do like I did and put it back into the date night rotation — impress your date with a little Kandinsky on a plate.

FARM Restaurant at Carneros Resort is located at 4048 Sonoma Highway in Napa. Seating is indoor and outdoor with ample parking nearby. For more information, go to: farmatcarneros.com.

The Mayne Menu is a food review column by Tracy J. Mayne. For suggestions on where to eat next, email themaynemenue@gmail.com.