

THE FRENCH LAUNDRY

SOURCE OF PLEASURE

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Far away from the biggest cities in the United States is the small idyllic town of Yountville in California's Napa Valley. The biggest tourist attraction in the town of fewer than 3,000 people is an old laundry. It is so popular that visitors can expect a few months' wait to get in. The French Laundry, however, does not offer laundry services

but something very different – the world's best food. The restaurant has been voted the best in the world twice. It is no wonder then that we and thousands of others like us are willing to travel there, even from the other side of the world. But it is true, you really must reserve your table at least two months in advance.

After a fifteen-hour flight and the hour-and-a-half car ride from San Francisco Airport, we arrive at the barren Yountville main street where the two-story stone home of The French Laundry is located. The building blends inconspicuously into the street scene. In the inner court, we are greeted by the engagingly cheerful Kristine Keefe. She introduces herself as the head of PR! We do not recall ever visiting a place that had its own head of public relations. Kristine leads us directly through a small idyllic garden into a kitchen where people busily and without much expression are preparing for the night. The kitchen's sous chef, Devin Knell, opens dozens of Sevruga caviar cans while keeping an eye on his team's activities. The work of the kitchen team of twenty is highly organized with no unnecessary talk. On the wall of the kitchen is a large plasma TV streaming video from the restaurant kitchen.

-The video is transmitted in real time from Thomas Keller's New York restaurant Per Se. In this way, kitchen staff is able to communicate new food production innovations more efficiently and quickly apply new techniques on their side of the country. Keefe says, adding that Thomas Keller is very dynamic in leading all of his restaurants and bakeries.

Even though Keller's business ventures have expanded to eight locations, The French Laundry occupies its own special place in Thomas Keller's heart. The French Laundry is where Keller's success story began in 1992, when he arrived in Yountville on the initiative of a friend to inspect the place. He fell in love with the restaurant as soon as he set foot inside the rose-flanked garden. Keller, who had worked in numerous three-star Michelin restaurants in France, gave his heart to the French countryside kitchen. He had the feeling that he finally had found the place where he could fulfil his dream of offering modern American food from a classic French kitchen. Keller fell in love not only with the facilities, but with the unique atmosphere and history of the place.

The mayor's restaurant

The history of The French Laundry is an interesting one, extending all the way back to the end of the 1880s, when a saloon stood on the spot. When the Yountville town council banned alcohol from being served within a two-mile radius of the town, the saloon became a brothel. By the end of the 1920s, however, a French steam laundry had moved onto the site, and it operated there for a long time. In 1974, Yountville mayor Don Schmitt and his wife bought the

building and renovated it as a restaurant. They decided to honour the history of the place by keeping the old name. For the Schmitts, the restaurant was like a home where they could invite customers to enjoy their hospitality. They offered only one four-course menu, which they changed daily. Since Keller bought the place in 1994, he has perpetuated the values of the Schmitts by continuing to honour the long-time name of the place.

Way to the stars

Thomas Keller, 52, is a Californian who has had a long career and been awarded many notable prizes, each more prestigious than the last. Among the most recent is the award for best chef in the United States. He has been greatly recognised for his talent in his home country and abroad. He is the only American chef to own more than one three-star Michelin restaurant. The French Laundry and New York-based Per Se both are three-star. The French Laundry,

moreover, is the only three-star restaurant in California and since 2002 has been named among the top five restaurants in the world.

Keller bases his cuisine on American tastes, both modern and traditional, combining them uniquely with classic French cuisine. His goal is to stir strong feelings in customers through the ingenious mixing of taste sensations with stories about the origins of his dishes

and their ingredients. Instead of gimmicks, he strives for simplicity, which is most difficult to achieve, he says. First-rate ingredients are the foundation for everything he creates. The other critical factor is a knowledgeable staff tasked with transforming the ingredients into taste sensations which inspire emotion. One of Keller's trusted employees is The French Laundry's kitchen leader, 31-year-old Executive Chef Corey Lee. Korean-born Lee earned his stripes in London and Paris in multistar restaurants. In the United States, he has been named a rising star among chefs. He started working at The French Laundry in 2001, went to New York to open Keller's new Per Se restaurant, and was there until Keller asked him to return to The French Laundry to assume responsibility for the kitchen.

-I enjoy working here. California is a real mecca for food lovers. We have excellent ingredients available here from the entire spectrum – from vegetables and fruits to meats and fish and seafood. Best of all, it's all fresh, says Lee.

Boldly combining the ingredients from nearby areas with modern production techniques and creative American thinking in a traditional French countryside kitchen, Lee says he is able to create the taste sensations The French Laundry offers. Lee cannot emphasise enough the importance of origin in the ingredients he uses, saying:

- In Yountville alone there are two farms from which we acquire many ingredients. We get our delicious butter from the smallest dairy in the United States in Vermont, where seven cows produce the milk for the butter. Vegetables, spice flowers and fruit, including white strawberries, we pick up across the road, from the Jacobsen garden. Yoghurts and cheeses we get from the Andante Dairy, where Soyong Scanlon exclusively develops whatever dairy products we ask for. On top of that, we cultivate two acres of farm land that we own.

-We plan our dishes according to which ingredients are most usable. The ingredients determine what we produce. This is why we create new menus daily. We are innovative, of course, but for us

innovation always refers back to the past. By this I mean that to innovate is not to make something completely new, but to be original and excited about what we were able to create earlier. In practice, it involves maintaining the nine-course menu concept and developing our dishes. We are always thinking of how we can create more flavourful sensations from first-rate ingredients.

By way of illustration, Lee mentions his imitation of the nutty Iberico ham. He achieves it using local ingredients. Air dried Japanese beef is aromatised with low-tannin acorns from Valley Oaks oak trees. Grinding and soaking the acorns in milk with fat and serving the resulting mixture as a jelly accompaniment to the air-dried ham creates a taste sensation inspired by the authentic Iberico.

The French Laundry also offers a fascinating nine-course vegetarian menu. "It is homage to the wonderful vegetables from which we can produce delicious dishes. The menu is by no means made for just for vegetarians but it is offered specifically as a comparable alternative menu to the protein-driven menu," Lee emphasizes.

Corey Lee says The French Laundry's success is based on three key factors: commitment to the product, experienced staff, and a clear vision for the place. At the same time, he cites the strong bond between the dining and kitchen staff and the holistic approach to creating a restaurant sensation. Referring to the philosophy of The French Laundry, he says it is a matter of providing not only an excellent meal and wines but a journey which transports the customer to taste memories or to pleasures never before experienced at all.



A journey to pleasure

Unlike many other three-star restaurants, The French Laundry offers its guests a very cosy atmosphere. The co-siness of the place and the informal service create the perfect setting for a gastronomic adventure without unnecessary tensions. The informality makes it easy for diners to let their emotions rise uninhibited. Their emotions are stirred not only by the tastes but also by the stories the sensitive dining staff relate about the origins of ingredients when they introduce the dishes. The wine list is extremely comprehensive and is priced in keeping with a restaurant of this category. When selecting a wine, it is more interesting to stay with the offerings from the region's small producers and notice how well they complement the food offerings. The

wine knowledge of The French Laundry's dining staff is superior thanks to a systematic training program conceived by Paul Roberts MS, one of the world's 120 Master Sommeliers, who is responsible for the beverage offerings at all of Keller's restaurants.

-People come here after a long journey from places all over the world. We need to make sure that customers feel that we respect the time they give us. This can happen only if we can ensure a first-rate meal experience by providing outstanding service and unique products, Roberts says.

Given the visit and lunch experience we enjoyed, we can confirm that Paul Roberts is a man of his word. Our experience at The French Laundry was positive in every respect – the food in itself was delicious and beautifully presented. With the help of the sommelier, we were able to select and enjoy fine wines which complemented our dishes perfectly.

What then makes The French Laundry one of the best restaurants in the world?

It is hard to say what raises the place above other top restaurants apart from the feeling which the staff inspires in the customer. Once the physical framework is in place and everything has been fine-tuned, the emotional aspects become central. This is where Keller and his team have succeeded at The French Laundry. Customers, subcontractors and staff cannot help but be impressed by the care The French Laundry gives not only to detail and execution, whatever the activity, but also to the effort it takes to continually cultivate its approach. Sadly, these things are rare in the modern world. Luckily, there are a few places left where they can be experienced with all of the senses. The French Laundry is definitely one of them. After travelling thousands of kilometres to one of the best restaurants in the world, many are surprised to discover that they have not reached their destination when they step into The French Laundry. On the contrary, it is at that point that the journey truly begins – the journey to pleasure.

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Our lunchtime taste journey of nine course menu at The French Laundry lasted a whopping 4.5 hours. It is worth noting that not once did we notice the passage of time, the journey was so enjoyable. The dishes were beautifully presented, visually minimalist, with very refined flavours.

The menu's biggest surprises were the appetizers, the most delicious being the beetroot pyre with its velvety structure and sour cream and nuts, the cold cauliflower pannacotta with its deeply subtle yet intense aftertaste, and – the most magnificent taste sensation on the menu – the egg flan made into bouillon spiced with truffle and served in an eggshell. Its silky texture and incredibly intense chocolate taste were absolutely disarming.

Of the warm foods, the slow-braised rabbit with truffle dressing transported our taste buds. The roasted lamb fillet, though flavourful and tender, was unsurprising. The local Tomme cheese was tasty, though the sides served with it stole some of the limelight. The sensations on the latter part of the menu included a salt tray brought to the table with four different salts on offer – a Japanese salt, a Hawaiian red and black salt, Camargue's sea salt and Montana salt from the Jurassic period 40 million years ago.

The desserts provided a fine ending to the long menu: to begin with, a quite fresh buttermilk sherbet, followed by an intensely sweet chocolate praline dessert, and lastly a refreshingly light bavaois produced from Granny Smith apples.

All the wines were exceptionally well-chosen even though none in and of itself was particularly memorable. The most interesting wines were the ones created jointly by Thomas Keller and Paul Roberts. These were the Modicum Cabernet Sauvignon wines, the first two vintages of which – 2001 and 2002 – were offered for tasting together with the lamb. The wines produced with Harlan's help were very good and concentrated but were still too young to stir any great emotion. Even though the wines by themselves were not spectacular they performed as fine complements to the food. All of the wines were especially well chosen to complement the dishes served, making the entire experience absolutely positive. The wines were excluded from the menu price.



Wines

VILMART CHAMPAGNE BRUT 1999

LAZY CREEK ANDERSON VALLEY RIESLING 2004

D'OLIVEIRA RESERVA TERRANTEZ 1977

PALMINA ARNEIS 2006

TABLAS CREEK VINEYARDS, ESPRIT DE BEAUCASTEL BLANC

MARTINELLI THREE SISTERS CHARDONNAY 2004

MODICUM 2001

MODICUM 2002

CALERA VOGNIER 2006

AIDA LATE HARVEST ZINFANDEL

(JL 92P. PN 94P.)

(JL 85P. PN 88P.)

(JL 88P. PN 90P.)

(JL 87P. PN 83P.)

(JL 85P. PN 88P.)

(JL 86P. PN 99P.)

(JL 89P. PN 91P.)

(JL 88P. PN 87P.)

(JL 86P. PN 84P.)

(JL 86P. PN 89P.)

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