

The Carmel Pine Cone

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FOOD & WINE

The CVR Tomahawk Experience, wine pairings to go, and plenty of patio

CARMEL VALLEY Ranch keeps executive chef Tim Wood busy, with its restaurant, clubhouse, and other venues, as well as banquets and room service. He's the creative force behind them all, including the upscale resort's Valley Kitchen, the lodge restaurant that's gone through several iterations over the past decade under different ownerships, but is settling into a pattern of inspired food that's not at all fussy yet continues to be interesting.

At dinner, customers can start with something hearty, like

Soup to Nuts

By MARY SCHLEY

artichoke spinach gratin or wild caught prawns and white cheddar grits, or take a cooler route, with tuna poke and avocado over seaweed salad, kicked up with jalapeño and citrus olive oil and spring onion ponzu, or ceviche featuring locally caught halibut — just about the perfect preparation for the lean fish, which tends to dry out and toughen with very little cooking.

Wood brings a little of his New York heritage to the table with his special CVR Tomahawk Experience, a 28-oz. bone-in ribeye carved tableside on a rolling butcher block and cutting boards he ordered from a small woodshop in the Catskills. The steak is referred to as a tomahawk because that's what the long rib bone and sizable cut of beef resemble.

It's cooked to order and served with generous amounts of grilled cippolini onions, Hog Farm's spring asparagus, Wood special "I'm stuffed" potatoes, and sauces like spicy aioli and House of Wood Chutney. The meat is placed atop crusty country bread, which soaks up the juices and becomes a decadent aspect of the dish, not just filler.

Clubhouse brunch

The affable and always approachable Mark Buzan works at the Ranch's sommelier and has put together a wine list that carries a lot of highly regarded Monterey County wines, as well as splurge-worthy offerings from the Napa area and a few select imports. Buzan is the antithesis of the cliché snob sommelier, and he takes great pleasure in finding (and sharing) wines that are not only interesting and delicious, but are good values, too.

The culinary team also recently launched a casual brunch in C.V. Ranch's windowed clubhouse, accompanied by live music and bottomless mimosas. It's fairly traditional, but with

plenty of quality ingredients, like fresh fruit, decadent breakfast pastries and petits fours, breads, toasts, an omelet station with at least a half-dozen fillings, and a carving station with prime rib. The crispness of brunch mainstays like roasted po-

tatoes and bacon fall prey to the lidded serving dishes that trap moisture, but there's still plenty to fill a plate (or a few), for

Continues next page



Rio Grill chef Eduardo Coronel is introducing a new mussels dish — pictured here with "Just Peachy," a blend of new Ketel One Botanical Peach & Orange Blossom with muddled peach — and the New New York steak May 29.



From previous page

\$39.95 per person for adults and \$29.95 for kids ages 5 to 12.

Carmel Valley Ranch might rely on hotel guests for the bulk of its restaurant business, but it's also a favorite of locals, with good reason. To learn more, visit www.carmelvalleyranch.com.

■ Rio chef lines up new dishes

Rio Grill executive chef Eduardo Coronel developed some new dishes and updated others on the busy restaurant's lunch and dinner menus.

The Firebox Mussels appetizer, for instance, had mussels and other ingredients cooked together in foil, which yielded a tasty but inconsistent dish, so he shifted to steaming them in spicy Creole butter, Alvarado Street Brewing Co. ale, Spanish chorizo, leeks and shallots. They come with a couple of pieces of grilled sourdough bread for sopping up the broth.

Customers wanting more vegetarian op-

tions should be pleased with the wood-grilled Impossible burger. The latest trendy meat alternative, and the most meat-like creation to hit the market so far, is topped with pepper Jack cheese, grilled onions, sautéed mushrooms and avocado, and served with a salad of arugula, chilies, cotija cheese, lime pepitas and avocado dressing. It won't sway a meat lover and is a little too soft in texture to truly mimic a beef patty, but it's certainly satisfying.

Available only at dinner, the vegetable risotto with poblano pesto is rich, with a lot of cream and Asiago cheese, and contains a dice of grilled corn, roasted poblanos and bell peppers, squash and mushrooms, along with black beans. Balsamic-soaked pear tomatoes and a drizzle of reduced balsamic lend a little bit of sweet, acidic contrast.

The delicious New New York replaces another steak dish on the dinner menu. A 12-ounce chunk of USDA prime boneless New York steak is topped with smoky ancho chili jus and bacon-herb butter, and served with baby carrots roasted in honey, and Hatch green chili-cheddar whipped potatoes.

Also debuting are Southwestern cioppino to replace the Southwestern paella, and a chili relleno stuffed crab, artichoke, spinach, Hatch chili cream cheese, and Oaxacan cheese, served with grilled flatbread.

Check them out by stopping in at the restaurant in the Crossroads, or going online to www.riogrill.com.

■ B&B to go

Deborah Wenzler at Baum & Blume in Carmel Valley Village now offers special takeout boxes for folks visiting the area's numerous tasting rooms, many of which don't offer snacks. She calls the recyclable boxes "Degustation ... A-Go-Go," and includes items that pair well with a range of local wines but are also fine on their own for a picnic in the park or at the beach.

Each \$20 box, which can be ordered ahead and picked up at Baum & Blume at 4 El Caminito, or delivered for free to the Mercy, Idle Hour, Bunter-Spring and Rexford tasting rooms, includes smoky Turkish red pepper dip with pita crisps, roasted almonds, house-made pâté with pistachio butter and sliced baguette, dried apricots stuffed with bleu cheese, savory Parmesan-lavender shortbreads, salted caramel brownies, and fresh fruit.

Call (831) 535-4972.

■ Moroccan at Folktale

Folktale Winery will host another pop-up dinner May 30, this time featuring the culinary team's interpretation of Moroccan food. Each course will be paired with a different Folktale wine.

Led by chef Todd Fisher, winery chef de

cuisine Danny Leach, sous chef Eddie Martinez and others plan to create a six-course feast, starting with appetizers and sparkling brut, followed by grilled kefta (seasoned ground meat) with pomegranate molasses and mint, paired with chardonnay. Spiced vegetable soup will come next, with Chalone pinot noir, and then chicken pastilla (wrapped in filo with spices) and Loire 777 pinot noir. Roasted lamb will be paired with Le Mistral Grenache, and for dessert, almond pastry with burnt orange gelato, served alongside sparkling rosé.

Seating is available between 6 and 8 p.m., and dinner costs \$85 per person, plus tax and tip. To reserve, call (831) 293-4455. Folktale Winery is located at 8940 Carmel Valley Road.

■ Rosé on the patio

Christian Adams, the man in charge of wine at Montrio Bistro on Calle Principal in downtown Monterey, will host a Rosé Patio Party in the restaurant's street-side alfresco dining area Sunday, May 27, from 5 to 7 p.m. Adams said he plans on showcasing a dozen pink wines from all over the world, for just \$10 per person.

Local favorites Caraccioli and Joyce will be shared alongside three dry (as in, not sweet) rosés from Germany, Cynth and Scribe rosés from Sonoma, "and a really cool native-yeast-fermented rosé from Forlorn Hope coming from Calaveras County," Adams said.

Sip some wine and stay for dinner. To learn more, visit www.montrio.com.

Continues next page



La Merienda, Monterey's festive birthday party and barbecue, is set for 11:15 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the Memory Garden at Custom House Plaza June 2. For more information and tickets, go to MontereyHistory.org.

FOOD & WINE

From previous page

■ Memorial Day BBQ at Bernardus

Bernardus Lodge at Carmel Valley Road and Las Laureles Grade is planning a Memorial Day Barbecue with live music at Lucia Restaurant & Bar to accompany barbecued free-range chicken and natural Angus beef, smoked sausages, country potato salad, organic green salad, and corn on the cob.

The picnic will run from noon to 2:30 p.m. May 28, and costs \$45 for adults and \$20 for kids ages 5 to 12, plus tax and tip.

■ President's gala honors Baker

Members of the American Culinary Federation's Monterey chapter voted to name Tony Baker, chef of Montrio Bistro and creator of Baker's Bacon, as their Chef of the Year, and he'll be honored at a June 10 dinner open to all at the InterContinental hotel on Cannery Row. The 44th Annual President's Gala and

Chef of the Year Dinner will include commendations from U.S. Rep. Jimmy Panetta and other dignitaries, and will also honor recipients of the President's Award, Purveyor of the Year, and the Humanitarian Award.

The English-born Baker graduated from culinary school in Bristol and worked at several highly acclaimed restaurants throughout the country before moving to the United States in 1994, when he joined Tony Tollner's Downtown Dining restaurant group. After a stint at the Rio Grill, Baker moved to Montrio in 1997 and has been running the kitchen there ever since, making the lively and innovative spot a top choice for dinner and drinks in town.

He's participated in numerous charitable events, raising money for local disaster relief efforts, Meals on Wheels and other worthy causes, and has been on TV and radio. Baker has participated in a decade's worth of Pebble Beach Food & Wine festivals and last year was invited to cook at the Obsession food festival at Northcote Manor in England alongside talented chefs from all over the world.

Tickets to the dinner — which starts with hors d'oeuvres and Champagne at 5 p.m., followed by awards, silent and live auctions, and a four-course gourmet dinner prepared by executive chef Matt Bolton to pair with local wines — are \$135 per person. The auctions benefit the chapter's scholarship fund. To register, go to montereybaychefs.org.

■ Monterey cops hand out Slurpees to good kids

The 23rd nationwide Operation Chill will kick off again this summer, with Monterey Police Department handing out coupons for free Slurpees to kids who do good deeds. The collaboration with 7-Eleven began in Philadelphia in 1995 and has spread across the country, giving away more than 19 million Slurpees.

Police use the coupons to build their relationships with younger members of their communities by rewarding them for "good deeds, constructive activities and acts of kindness," such as helping someone, deterring crime, or taking part in a community or police-sponsored event. Each coupon can be redeemed for a small Slurpee at a participating 7-Eleven store.

For more information, contact Lt. Mike Bruno at (831) 646-3965.



PHOTO/MARY SCHLEY

Executive chef Tim Wood carves up a juicy Tomahawk bone-in ribeye tableside at Carmel Valley Ranch.