

A Culinary Odyssey

The Ritz Carlton's Dining Room

BY KAREN VILLALPANDO

Dining out in Los Angeles can be, for some, a nightly routine. Maybe it's Mexican on Mondays, Thai on Tuesdays or Szechwan the next night.

But sometimes dining out can be an extraordinarily memorable experience.

My husband and I had such an experience recently when we dined at The Dining Room at the Ritz Carlton Huntington Hotel & Spa in Pasadena with Chef de Cuisine Craig Strong taking us on a culinary odyssey.

For the past six years, Strong has been at the helm at The Dining Room, where he carefully crafts each dish with brilliance and subtlety. His commitment to excellence is apparent with every plate placed before awaiting diners. "I love cooking for people and seeing their reactions to the dishes I've prepared," Strong said.

In The Dining Room, you may order from the a la carte menu, or order from the pre-set tasting menu with wines selected for each course. On the evening we were there, Strong introduced a new concept in dining where he visits with diners and inquires about their preferences, dislikes or allergies. Once he gets a feel for the diners' tastes, he returns to the kitchen to begin creating his masterpieces. Craig calls this a "Blind Tasting" menu, where he creates smaller portions of dishes and pairs wine with each course. Let the journey begin!

We were presented with two amuse bouches, first a miniature caviar taco, with diced onion, crème fraiche and caviar wrapped with a small blini. The second bite was tuna tartare upon cucumber slices. Both were small, yet packed with flavor, just enough to tease the palate. We had a glass of champagne with our first course of crab salad with grapefruit, vanilla mouseline and candied grapefruit zest. A mouseline is a mayonnaise lightened up with whipped cream. The crab was on a bed of greens with a honey and sesame crisp between the layers. "Vanilla is a spice like anything else and not meant for just desserts. The sweet meat of the crab is complemented perfectly with the vanilla," Strong explained.

Our next course was diver scallops topped with seared Hudson Valley foie gras with sunchoke puree and chicken jus. This dish was simply amazing. Craig paired it with a light Riesling allowing the flavors of the scallop and foie gras to come through. The puree is made from the root of a sunflower plant, and the chicken jus added a rich, smooth finish.

Turbot is a popular fish in Europe, often referred to as European halibut. It comes from the same family, according to Strong, but is firmer in texture. This was our next course, served with spaghetti squash, Romaine hearts lightly glazed with butter and a Trinidad curry. Mussels steamed in vermouth were placed around the fish. Chef Strong paired this dish with a fine Foley pinot noir. Strong says he uses a "soft hand" when adding spices to a dish. You never want to overpower the food, but rather leave the diner wondering, "What was that flavor." Subtlety is Craig's "strong" suit.

In contrast to the Foley pinto noir, we were poured a Byron pinot for the next dish prior to it being served. I called it the Tina Turner pinot, a little rougher. Strong chose this wine because it paired well with the earthy partridge and poached pears he was serving next. The fragrant pears were poached in red wine, with salsify and parsley puree finishing the plate. Salsify is a root vegetable, somewhat like a turnip, and the Italian parsley puree was a nice, zesty accompaniment. It was amazing how the two pinots were so different, yet so well matched with the dishes.

Believe it or not, our odyssey was not yet over. The crescendo was a filet mignon served atop braised ox tails with a Thai spiced beef sauce. Strong likes pairing two different beef cuts to contrast the flavors. The tail, being the stronger flavor is contrasted with the milder flavored filet. Again, Chef Strong uses a soft hand when creating the Thai



photo courtesy of The Ritz Carlton

The Dining Room at the Ritz Carlton Huntington Hotel is classically traditional, with warm woods and graceful chandeliers providing an inviting atmosphere.



photo courtesy of The Ritz Carlton

Chef de Cuisine Craig Strong

spiced beef sauce. The ox tails were simmered in lemon grass, (galanga) coconut milk, red curry and cinnamon, and then reduced for the sauce. A bold ZD cabernet sauvignon was poured with the dish and the compilation of flavors was remarkable. The portions were smaller than if you ordered these dishes from their a la carte menu, making our dining experience very pleasurable without being overwhelming.

Dessert allows the kitchen to show off their talents with home made ice creams, like kumquat and strawberry. A small scoop of ice cream is served with desserts like Napoleon puff pastry or strawberry shortcake. Pineapple mousse with candied apples was also delicious. Homemade candies, truffles and petit fours were lastly presented and our odyssey had come to an end.

One such candy was so delicious, I told Craig he should call it "Turkish delight." Chef Strong said he is considering nam-

ing the blind tasting "a culinary odyssey".

Strong's 13 years with the Ritz Carlton and the past six in Pasadena have served him well. His young face and slim physique make you believe he cooks with health in mind. It's obvious he loves his job and making people happy. "I get such a kick out of doing it," he said. Yes, Craig we believe you do.

The Ritz Carlton Huntington Hotel and Spa is located on 23 lush acres at 1401 S. Oak Knoll in a residential section of Pasadena.

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