

Laura Ness: Fandango proves a Continual Feast

Written by *laura ness her VineNess*

Feb. 23, 2014 |

thecalifornian.com

Fandango never ceases to amaze, from the décor to the delightful personalities of owners Pierre and Marietta Bain, who have been together 34 years now and going strong. It was a delight to partake of their exquisite cuisine with my posse of Wild Wine [Women](#)

[☞](#), who, for a Valentine's Day luncheon took over the beautifully fresco'd front room at a long table adorned with flowers, baskets of fresh bread, paté and cornichons. One could live on this paté alone, accompanied by ample bread and local pinot noir: Comanche Cellars 2010 SLH pinot performed handsomely. We swooned over the croque monsieur: a culinary culmination of french toast meets Monte Christo, only better. The crispy egg-soaked fried bread, melty cheese and tender ham make this a treat one could enjoy any time of day.

We dove into steaming pans of paella, brimming over with mussels, prawns, clams, tender fresh fish, calamari and bay scallops, with the perfect dollop of peas and spicy linguica: heaven with Burrell School cabernet franc, Windy Oaks pinot, Mesa del Sol sangiovese and Comanche Cellars chardonnay. Oh, we had all those open and more, including En Garde albarino, Saint Arcangeli pinot, Fortino cabernet, and more than you could shake a corkscrew at. It went on. And so did the food — a lively mixed green salad followed, providing a nice counterpoint before the profiteroles rolled into town. These are an avalanche of cream puff pastry stuffed with coffee ice cream, all gussied up with whipped cream and a decadent molten lava-like chocolate sauce. This was accompanied by Ann Hougham's newly released Mesa del Sol late harvest zinfandel, which is brilliant. Not even the least bit cloying, it captures the soul of her sweet little vineyard on the edge of the Ventana Wilderness, and is available at Trio in Carmel. If you haven't been to Fandango in a spell, time's a-wasting and I believe I hear that croque monsieur calling your name.

Chef Dory Ford Makes Valentine Magic at Cima Collina

Winemaker, Annette Hoff Danzer, smiles as she accepts compliments on her most excellent 2010 Cima Collina riesling from the Tondre Grapefields vineyard. She explains it wasn't easy making this wine: the fruit was riddled with rot and pretty pathetic, but she salvaged it and then some. Kudos! And her wines paired perfectly with gastronomical delights by Chef Dory Ford of Aqua Terra Culinary.

Ford, who hails from Vancouver Island, insists on fresh caught Dungeness crab and the starter salad he did with crab, shaved fennel, Cara Cara oranges, castelfranco, crème fraiche and citrus vinaigrette, topped with avocado fritters, was sensational. The avocado slices were buttermilk batter dipped and fried: crunchy outside, warm and soft inside. Accompanied by the totally delightful 2012 Cima Collina Tondre Grapefield chardonnay, this was a magical pairing. Annette admits to being very fond of this one, probably her best chard ever.

From the sea, we waded into the wooded dale, with divine slices of prosciutto-wrapped pheasant breast served over a creative and spicy mix of braised lentils, shaved [brussels](#)

[☞](#) sprouts with confit and wild mushrooms. It made a fine partner to the 2010 Cima Collina Tondre Grapefield pinot noir, with its profoundly earthy essence.

Chef Ford did a fine [job](#)

on the next course, essentially beef two ways, with seared prime rib beef cap seasoned with a pinch of pepper per person, an oxtail croquette, prune ketchup, broccolini and kale chips. Owner, Dick Lumpkin, who sat next to me, said he thought the 2008 Tondre pinot reminded him of an older French Bordeaux.

Ford's totally awesome dessert course was inspired by the desire to deliver both sweet and savory, and the dried apricot and blue cheese tart served with candied walnuts and honey ice cream did that in spades. Accompanied by the 2012 Cima Collina Tondre Grapefield late harvest Riesling, glittering like gold in the glass, it was a magical cap off to the evening. Lumpkin smiled proudly as those glasses of nectar turned the room to silent admiration.

Los Laureles Lodge: Somewhere Between Now and Then

We'd always wondered what it would be like to stay at Los Laureles, this quaint and charming place that feels like a private compound, with its various lodging options, pool, spacious grounds and on site restaurant with lively bar. The rooms are clean and homey, with great cross ventilation, shiny wooden floors and cozy, comfy beds with nice linens. I like a place where you can open windows on both sides. A very delicious continental breakfast is served in the well-furnished main lodge, with blazing fireplace surrounded by a deep sofa and armchairs, from 8 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.: civilized hours, in my book.

With its many alcoves and side rooms, the restaurant is a place to hold parties both small and large, and the bar is a happening thing, all dark wooded, wainscoted, wallpapered and hung with fascinating photos of yesteryear. I felt like I had stepped into one of those old wayfarer taverns on the east coast where my [family](#)

would go to celebrate big birthdays. For just a moment, I swore I heard my twinkly-eyed scoundrel of a grandfather say to the waitress, "Honey, bring me another three fingers of bourbon."

Abalone By Chef Matt Bolton, Wine By Abalone Farmer Seavey

Truly, there is nothing finer than an afternoon overlooking the Pacific, dining on freshly caught abalone courtesy of abalone farmer, Art Seavey of Monterey Abalone Company, prepared by Chef Matt Bolton of Pacific's Edge, and accompanied by wines from Art's parent's Seavey vineyard in Napa.

It was no easy feat setting up for this post-Valentine's Day feast, as Restaurant Manager, Jacques Melac, explained. Cleaning up after the last guests left in the wee hours of the morning, they had to hustle to get this one set up. But he clearly loves his job. So does Executive Chef Matt Bolton. Apparently, so does Art Seavey, who sustainably farms about a quarter million California red abalone yearly in cages at the end of wharf #2 in Monterey. He feeds them kelp and keeps them away from the sea otters and sea lions that view those cages as an alcoholic does a package store.

Visit Monterey Abalone to fetch your own: a better alternative than diving for them yourself. As the designated diver who showed up for the lunch, Jeff Duckham from Mendocino, shared, "I've been diving since 1982. I risk life and limb: I go to extremes for these things. More people die abalone fishing than any other sport." Considering you then have to tenderize the bejeezus out of them, he added, "If you don't die diving, you'll probably end up with a rotator cuff injury!"

Bolton, whose team whacked the extra large abalone (twice the normal size of 4") with a mallet for a good long time, did an excellent job of pairing seared abalone with Meyer lemon coulis and black trumpet mushrooms with a decidedly older 2008 Seavey chardonnay. He really nailed it with the abalone cioppino, which included clams, mussels and scallops in a spicy, thyme-tinged broth, raising the 2006 Seavey cabernet sauvignon to a new level. The 11 percent petit verdot in that [baby](#)

[is](#) keeping it up later at night than it could manage on its own. What a treat to enjoy older wines, especially when they're paired with food that takes a bow to their provenance.

Bolton seized the opportunity to pair a 1999 Seavey merlot with a Valrhona chocolate tart, with crispy rice, milk chocolate mousse and blackberry ice cream. It was such a lovely way to end an inspired meal. Don't miss this opportunity if it comes around again. This was the perfect way to celebrate Valentine's Day, or a birthday, as happened with one of our tablemates.

During the lunch, we heard about the work of MEarth, a local community nonprofit, located in Carmel Valley, from Managing Director, Tanja Roos, who explained the activities the educational facility offers to local school children. Their mission is to educate and inspire through environmental stewardship, and to do so, MEarth provides innovative hands-on learning opportunities to connect local youth to nature, food, and community.