

L'Asperge, an intricate dish prepared at La Palme d'Or

FINE DINING AT LA PALME D'OR, CANNES' ONLY MICHELIN-STARRED RESTAURANT

Europe | France

May 25, 2015 | WORDS BY Becca Hensley



Culinary artistry and poetic mastery is paramount at La Palme d'Or, the only two Michelin-starred restaurant in Cannes

I won't mince words. Chef Christian Sinicropi is a modern-day Picasso. He's that creative, charismatic and unafraid to meld artistic disciplines.

I first met Sinicropi, who helms the only two-star Michelin restaurant in Cannes, La Palme d'Or, nine years ago, when he inherited the head chef position from his mentor, the much-awarded Christian Willier. I remember a dish shaped like a hand, comprised from unexpected combinations – cucumbers and savoury caviar caramel crème – and paired with a short, handwritten poem. At that time, I was writing a story on Picasso's creative period spent at Vallauris, near Cannes. Sinicropi, with his intense gaze and barely contained passion, immediately made me think of the artist.

I return to La Palme d'Or in May, about a week before the Cannes Film Festival. The restaurant occupies a sleek, second floor portion of the Art Deco Hotel Martinez, overlooking the world-famous, see-and-be-seen, lounge chair-bedecked piers of La Croisette. I'm lucky to snag a table at Sunday lunch, when the restaurant is thronged with celebrities, and happily, I am seated with a view of the sea. The waiter pours me a glass of champagne and brings me a scroll. It's not a menu, but a treatise – a philosophical explanation of the gastronomic universe of Sinicropi's La Palme d'Or, a culinary atelier meant to awaken all the senses. "Welcome to my cornucopia of delight," it reads.



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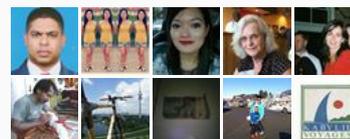
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Preparing a dish at La Palme d'Or. Photo by Zoe Fidji Schmidmaier

Since my first meal with Sinicropi, he has cooked for film stars, film directors and royalty, and instituted a gourmet trend dubbed “decor dishes” – which means he personally designs, and in some cases crafts himself, the unique platters and plates. Like Picasso, Sinicropi (and his artist wife, Catherine) mould and fire the ceramics in Vallauris. A writer, ruminator, painter, sculptor, actor and chef, Sinicropi brings artistry to the kitchen. From his daily jaunts to Cannes' Marché Forville, his menu follows the seasons, and he celebrates his partners – the farmers, gardeners, fishermen, and producers of Provence.

As in a symphony, the courses fall into “movements” – three courses of the same ingredient prepared in three distinct ways. “This shows the many layers of not just food, but life,” he says. Guests can also order à la carte, choosing from one movement to the next. While perusing the list, I dip obsidian-coloured squid-ink bread into velvety, monk-made olive oil from the isle of St. Laurent. Lest I take my experience too seriously, the amuse-bouche arrives in a striped, ceramic, circus tent – the treats attached as flags to the piece of art.

Finally, I beg Sinicropi to choose for me. First, he brings me the second movement of his Dublin Bay Prawn category: purple asparagus paired with a crispy prawn, fused with a dollop of creamy local cheese.

Next, he delivers a layered dish of spider crab, served in an expressionistic ceramic crab shell. Dessert-like, it has a trio of layers: a broth, a flan and a crunchy, cookie-like bottom. But the coup de grâce might be the tender, 72-hour cooked lamb, meadow flowers and umami-awakening roasted tomatoes, which arrive in a handmade bowl set atop a plate scribbled with poetry. The finale is a simple raspberry mouse mounted on a biscuit, bursting with just-picked pizzazz.

Sinicropi yearns to cause “a little explosion to your senses”. At La Palme d'Or, he unfailingly achieves it.



Executive Chef Christian Sinicropi in Cannes, France

What: La Palme d'Or

Where: Grand Hyatt Cannes Hôtel Martinez, 73, Boulevard de la Croisette

Price: 78 to 178 Euros (US\$87-200) for three “movements” excluding drinks

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