



Soul of Sonoma

Becca Hensley dines on produce plucked, poached and cooked to perfection at **Santé** in Sonoma, an award-winning restaurant in the heart of Californian wine country

For Santé chef de cuisine Andrew Cain, picking his favourite dish on the menu is like choosing between children. “Don’t ask a chef that,” he says. “I love them all.” But he readily lists his favourite ingredients. Morel mushrooms from Mount Shasta. California Delta asparagus. Foie gras. Luckily for Cain, Sonoma County – a verdant wine and food region less than an hour’s drive from San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge – isn’t exactly short on ingredients. With its Tuscan-like rolling hills, acres of planted vines, mammoth, soulful trees and a bevy of healing springs, Sonoma simply oozes abundance. The bounty of readily available produce makes it the ideal location for Santé, an acclaimed restaurant ensconced in the historic Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa.

Within walking distance from the town square, with its farmers’ markets, wine-tasting boutiques, shops and galleries, the hotel sits among a collection of curative springs and hike-worthy mountain trails. With more than 200 vineyards and wineries, farms, cheese makers, orchards and bakeries, most visitors to the storied destination spend their days eating and drinking. Some work it off with bike rides, tennis or hot-air balloon expeditions. In nearby Calistoga, some even partake in mud bathing – a spa ritual that dates back a century. But in the evening, everyone convenes at a restaurant to experience what the region’s many talented chefs have created from the *au courant* harvest.

Santé reigns as one of the county’s most revered restaurants. Perched alongside the hotel’s splendid night-lit pool, the restaurant exudes romance. Cosy, with exposed log rafters and old-world leather accents, Santé melds the homey comfort of a French country inn with the adventure of novel experiences – and the changeable menu never bores. “We might feature



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an item for a few weeks but when its season ends, we start over,” says Cain. “We are constantly working on the next dish.”

For brunch, I begin with cauliflower custard, brine-scented with caviar and served in a warm eggshell. It’s followed by a fortifying Salade Gourmande, a zealous blend of frisée lettuce, Sonoma duck confit, crunchy *haricots vert* (green beans), Maine lobster, poached hen egg (procured from the neighbouring farmer) and topped with an opulent black truffle vinaigrette. I end the meal with Chicken and Waffles – a southern-inspired plate of Wolf Ranch quail and buttermilk waffles given an acidic piquancy with pickled strawberries yet sweetened with honey butter, which is made from honey sourced from beehives on the hotel’s perimeter. Somehow, I manage to nibble a final, unexpected course of tiny, perfect pastries – washed down by strong black coffee and a bottomless glass of Gloria Ferrer sparkling wine.

Never cloying, the service at Santé astounds. But what really moved me was the palpable gourmet energy. When seated, you can think only of what you see on your plate. “I want to provide an experience that removes my guests from the worries of their lives,” says Cain. “Having a guest have a great experience at my restaurant is better than any award or accolade.” ☞

The important bit

WHAT: Santé

WHERE: Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa, 100 Boyes Boulevard, Sonoma, California

PRICE: US\$50-75 for dinner and \$45 for brunch including sparkling wine

TEL: +1 707 939 2415

www.santediningroom.com