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Restaurant: El Dorado Kitchen

405 First St. W.
Sonoma , CA 95476

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Tel. 707-996-3030

Californian cuisine

Jeff Cox overall rating: ★★★★★

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Kid-friendly rating: ★★

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Jeff Cox Review

June 19, 2005

Sonoma's cuisine scene has a bright new star.

Piatti is gone from its longtime spot on the northwest corner of the Sonoma town square. In its place is El Dorado Kitchen, the restaurant attached to the recently refurbished El Dorado Hotel -- an upscale hostelry that installed a swimming pool out back and advertises "poolside dining."

But the hotel and its setting are incidental to the food. My first inkling that something extraordinary was going on at El Dorado Kitchen was when the waiter said the evening's special entree was a slow-cooked pork belly from Hobbs Shore, the artisanal producer of pork products whose headquarters are in San Rafael. That rang a bell. First, I knew that Hobbs' pork products are revered by Bay Area chefs. However, the finest pork I ever tasted was a slow-cooked pork shoulder from a Pennsylvania pig fed apples from the farmer's orchard, served at The French Laundry, the gastronomic mecca in Yountville.

So I ordered the Pork Belly (\$18; 4 stars) and was astounded. It was even better than the pork shoulder at The French Laundry (and that's saying something). The cut is really uncured bacon, but here Hobbs gives it his own brine and spice cure -- it's not smoked and dried like bacon, but is elevated in flavor. The slow cooking method drains it of much of its fat, which turns to liquid and runs off. The top layer of fat, drained of its lard, turns slightly crisp and intensely flavored by its spices. Best of all, there's a feral, earthy, barnyard flavor to the crisp layer and the meat below that's decadent and utterly irresistible. The texture of this meat is almost like pudding, it's so melty and soft. And it's served on potato puree with

baby carrots, little onions, and apples in a sweet sauce. Holy cow! Or better, holy pig! I honestly don't think pork can get better than this.

So I asked the waiter who the chef is, and he brings me his card. It's Ryan Fancher, one of the great cooks at The French Laundry who brought a couple more of Thomas Keller's cooks with him. Aha! No wonder. Well, I thought, this is going to be an interesting dinner.

There was a prelude to the pork belly, however. The music on the sound system was a mite too loud, and sounded like the soundtrack to "Boogie Nights." We asked to have it turned down, and eventually that happened and it morphed into something more suitable for fine dining.

The tables have no cloths -- just bare wood -- and each is equipped with a small tea light, all except ours nicely lit and flickering romantically. We had to ask to have ours lighted. A small quibble, yes, but we did feel left out.

If it sounds as if there was a problem with the service, there wasn't -- far from it. First our waiter noticed that we liked good wine, and changed our five-ounce glasses for large 12-ouncers without our having to ask. And for the rest of the evening he was unflappable, polite, and superbly professional, despite our occasional bursts of rowdiness and hilarity. (The food was so unexpectedly good, we felt blessed and decided to have lots of fun.)

The wine list features bottles predominantly from the Kenwood to Carneros axis, and is extremely well chosen. Suffice it to say there's plenty to like from the \$30 to \$90 range.

We started with a plate of ice-cold Fanny Bay Oysters (\$12 for 6, \$23 for 12; 3 stars) from British Columbia, served with lots of lemon wedges. Yes, they're a little spawny at this time of the year, but I knew that going in. California Green Asparagus Soup (\$8; 4 stars) was a perfect cold soup. The flavor of fresh asparagus was rich and vibrant, and showed the hallmark of all good cooking -- that ingredients taste like what they are. The soup was laced with lemon creme fraiche.

Two slices of Salmon Terrine (\$9; 4 stars) were so light they nearly floated off the plate -- not an easy trick with fatty, oily salmon. The fish had been poached in licorice-flavored pastis and water and made into a delightful terrine, and served with frisee and olive oil-brushed crostini.

This was followed by a lovely Mache Salad (\$10; 3.5 stars). Mache -- also known as corn salad -- is comprised of small, tender, nutty-tasting leaves. In this salad, it's accompanied by baby red and yellow beets and grapefruit sections, and is lightly sprinkled with champagne vinaigrette.

Mycologists have learned how to grow matsutaki mushrooms -- also called hen of the woods -- commercially, giving Fancher the star ingredient for Roasted Mushrooms (\$10; 3 stars), comprised of matsutakis and chewy king trumpets served in a duxelle cream, which is mushrooms, shallots and herbs finely chopped and sautéed in butter, then splashed with cream to make a thick sauce. The flavor is earthy and rich.

The Frito Misto (\$9; 3.5 stars) is close to the best I've ever had, featuring crispy, salty chunks of battered and fried sunchokes, haricots vert and fennel drizzled with the perfect accompaniment of garlic aioli. Goat Cheese Ravioli (\$18; 3 stars) were tender and tasty, served in a cheesy white sauce with asparagus tips and shiitake mushroom caps.

Saddle of Lamb (\$25; 3 stars), the meaty part of the rack, is roasted and sliced and served with parsley, lemon peel and garlic garnish and a rich lamb jus. Spinach, little Tokyo Cross turnips, and lightly mashed potatoes complete the plate. Risotto (\$17; 3 stars), studded with fresh peas, is given a white truffle foam.

We tried three desserts, all \$7. Fig Newtons (3 stars) were figgy cookies with vanilla ice cream; Brown Butter Crepes (2.5 stars) were actually triple gooey bananas Foster with cinnamon ice cream, and Lemon Cheesecake (3.5 stars) was as good as you'll find in New York.

To sum up: The restaurant scene around Sonoma has been morphing so rapidly lately -- with several old faves closing or changing locations or management -- it's been hard to keep up. This new kid on the square definitely rates a starring role on the town's culinary stage.

Jeff Cox writes a weekly restaurant review column for Q. You can reach him at jeffcox@sonic.net.

Overall: ★★★★★
Price: \$\$\$\$
Ambiance: ★★★
Food: ★★★★★
Service: ★★★★★
Wine List: ★★★
Kid-friendliness: ★★

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