

Ritz-Carlton redefines dining at the counter



Mirrors provide a multi-dimensional view of the kitchen at Manzanita at the Ritz-Carlton Lake Tahoe. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – Knives go so fast it's a wonder no one is injured. Flames shoot up. Pans are occupying nearly every burner, yet nothing is being neglected. A quick squeeze and flick of the

wrist creates an artist-like design.

It's controlled chaos in the kitchen at Manzanita.

A small army of sous chefs is assisting Chef Chris Watkins who is in charge of the restaurant on this particular Friday.

This is no ordinary counter we are dining at. The wood and rock make for a seamless transition from the outdoors. It's more elegant than rustic. This is the Ritz, after all. But the splendor of Tahoe is not far away. To our right are windows that look out to the Martis Valley, while there is a more expansive view to our left of the hotel's patio and Northstar's ski slopes.



Chef Chris Watkins discusses the meal
with Bob Keller. Photo Copyright 2015
Carolyn E. Wright

In front of us is the show. With mirrors on the ceiling we are able to better see some of the precision workmanship of the men and women dressed in classic chef apparel. Not only are they preparing our six-course meals, but the restaurant is full of regular diners.

Manzanita Chef's Tasting Counter is a bit of a misnomer. At least the word "tasting" is – assuming one was to define it as a sample or bite-size. While most of the portions of the six-course dinner were not over the top, they were ample and appropriate to the point that we might have turned down a seventh course.

With that said, each morsel kept getting better. If we weren't full, we would not have wanted the experience to end.



The foie gras comes with foie mousse stuffed cherries and warm brioche. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

Watkins has been at Manzanita for less than a year, having

spent the last 10 years in San Francisco at restaurants like Campton Place and Aqua. He quickly had to show his versatility with what he was going to serve me because my personalized menu had fish on it – something I don't eat. He didn't seem fazed by the sudden change in plans.

Bob, Carolyn and I were presented with our own menus that outlined the six courses. For the most part theirs was the same except for the omission of soy for Carolyn. Mine was vegetarian.



The smoked trout set the bar high for the remainder of the courses. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

A smoked trout rillette with trout skin chicharone started the evening. Bob and Carolyn raved about the skin, adding that the flavors kept bursting in their mouths. I could say the same about the roasted beet salad with house made ricotta and honey rosemary vinaigrette.

Watkins explained that the foie gras is essentially deconstructed and put back together, which makes it taste less

gamey. Bob, who is a big fan of foie gras, raved about this incarnation of the delicacy.

The seared scallops with summer succotash was Carolyn's favorite course of the night. They were perfectly cooked and the flavor of the vegetables outstanding.



Wine steward Travis Masten introduces guests to an array of wines. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

Bob had a harder time picking a favorite, saying each course brought something new and another culinary surprise.

Being a fan of mushrooms, the fifth course – herb gnocchi with

fava beans peas, morels, mushroom consume and shaved pecorino – was hands down my favorite. My meat eating dinner mates had lamb in their dish. I know I was given more morels than they were. I was in heaven. The only disappointment was seeing the bottom of the bowl.

We had the option to buy a bottle of wine or pay for six tastings. We chose the latter, which was fun because wine steward Travis Masten introduced us to varietals and wineries we were not familiar with – such as Pedro Ximenez's Mayu from Chile.



A different libation for each course. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

This is the first summer the Ritz-Carlton at Lake Tahoe has offered the Chef's Tasting Counter. The counter accommodates six people. The intimate interaction with the chef and wine steward made for an even more enjoyable experience compared to most foodie events that involve a room full of guests.

Catering to small parties is exactly what the Ritz was aiming

to do when staff came up with the idea.



Chefs Chris Watkins, left, and Nick Leandro prepare one of the six courses. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

“We recognized an opportunity to enhance and further activate this existing counter space in the restaurant. With dining trends becoming more casual, not all diners are interested in a formal, sit-down pairing menu, but these same guests still want to enjoy a unique culinary experience and personal interaction with the culinarians,” Robin Penning with the Ritz told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Also making these dinners special is that the chef creates a meal for that evening for those at the counter that isn't being served elsewhere on property.

When it was all over, Carolyn said, "This is the best food I've had in a really long time."



Dessert – rum baba – poached peaches, apricot yoghurt sauce, marcona almond cookie crumbs and plum sorbet.
Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

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Notes:

- For reservations, call 530.562.3121. They must be made 48 hours in advance.
- Tasting Counter dinners are Fridays and Saturdays.

- Dinners start at \$95, with alcohol separate.
- Each dinner is six courses.