



The French Laundry

by **Dick Odom**

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Hmm! It dawned on me as we made dining reservations for Napa...I may not have another chance to go to The French Laundry (owned by Chef Thomas Keller it is arguably the best restaurant in the world), after all, I'm getting older, Jody is 9 years younger and our travel partners, Rhonda and Ken, are about 20 years younger than I. It is a bucket list thing, and you just don't know when you're gonna kick the old bucket. We'll be...“doing the laundry”!

One acquaintance told me it took him three years to get a reservation. A friend, Johnny Smith, said that on two occasions he knocked on the door to ask if they had had any cancellations...to no avail. But they did let him come in on one occasion and go into the kitchen (he said, “you'll wet your pants when you see the kitchen”).

Before getting into our feast I should mention, this would not have been remotely forthcoming without a huge offer from Ben Haefele (a Skillet & Glass enthusiast), who together with his two colleagues at Mandrake Capital Partners opened Stanly Ranch Auberge in Napa County Cali., in early May 2022. Ben invited not only Jody and me but our friends Rhonda and Ken to an extremely generous stay at a very, very inviting and promising resort—I am a real estate guy and Stanly Ranch is a story in itself and much of its dynamics captures the soul of Skillet & Glass...plus, plus, plus. The dates of the opening also coincided with the anniversaries of both us couples who happened to have been married on the same day of the same year nineteen years before. Needless to say, we accepted without hesitation Ben's offer, and had more than a grand experience.

Before delving into our experience, I'll share a little background. A number of years ago a close friend, as a Christmas gift, gave me a copy of *The French Laundry Cookbook* by Thomas Keller, published by Artisan Books, 1999. If you don't already have a copy I highly recommend it. My thoughts in perusing the book for the first time were "good grief, such small

portions...how do you make a meal?" But early in the book Chef Keller answered my question. I am an economist by education and in professional practice, and Keller titles his introduction to canapes "*The law of diminishing returns.*" He begins, "Most chefs try to satisfy a customer's hunger in a short time with one or two dishes. They begin with something great. The initial bite is fabulous. The second bite is great. But by the third bite—with many more to come—the flavor begins to deaden, and the diner loses interest." Now I was beginning to understand.

Back to the "Laundry"...we did it in style with a 5:00 reservation, outside in the garden, and with an ample wine budget. Truly the dining experience of a lifetime for me. This was a nine course meal, not counting the two appetizers, or Amuse Bouche.

As an aperitif, Patrick, our main waiter, started us with a glass of 2017 Schramsberg "*Modicum*" Extra Brut Blanc de Blancs North Coast Sparkling Wine. Modicum is an all-Chardonnay sparkling made in a collaboration between Schramsberg's winemaking team together with the sommelier team at The French Laundry. The production largely goes to Keller's restaurants. The sparkling did the job of a

good aperitif, both stimulating the appetite and refreshing the palate. I thought to myself though as we lifted our glasses, that the sparkly was less an aperitif than to toast three important things: our sharing anniversaries with Rhonda and Ken; spending generous time at a very, very upscale and promising resort; and dining at The French Laundry. “Here, here, here!” ...and now for the first bite...



“CORNET, EVERYTHING BAGEL WITH SALMON MOUSSE”

A cornet is something I tried to play in Junior High School band. I also liked Nutty Buddies as a kid, and

this looked like a miniature of that frozen cone of ice cream. But this was not ice cream. *Cornet* is the French word for horn and in the culinary world it is a cone shaped pastry filled with whatever Chef imagines. This was “*cornet, everything bagel with salmon mousse*” (that probably had some cream cheese included), one of Chef Keller’s creations, maybe inspired by a New England favorite, Nova, bagel and cream cheese. And it was...“everything” delightful.



“CABOT CHEDDAR CHEESE BISCUITS WITH CRISPY ‘RITZ CRACKERS’”

Next up, another Amuse Bouche, a tiny plate with sandwiched crackers called "*Cabot cheddar cheese biscuits with crispy 'Ritz Crackers'*". In France, 'Ritz Crackers' refers to a slightly buttery and slightly cheesy house-made biscuit or soft cracker. These were scarfed down pretty quickly but not in one bite. We had to savor the cheese filling and enjoy the buttery crunch of the biscuit.

Two Amuse Bouche and I discovered that Chef Keller has taken a page from Ringling brothers... "leave 'em wanting more." To which Patrick follows with a pour of *Pichler-Krutzler Gruner Veltliner Ried Pfaffenberg Alte Reben 2018*. The Gruner Veltliner is a white grape from Austria associated with Chardonnay and as with a good Chardonnay it was not too acidic, mellow with a dry finish but with fruity notes...then...



"OYSTERS AND PEARLS"

The **first course**, and a staple on Keller's menus for over 25 years, was *"Oysters and Pearls."* On seeing the dish for the first time I saw the two petite oysters and a generous portion of caviar, and I assumed the caviar represented pearls (black pearls), but I would be wrong (again). The two groupings were perched on a bed of custard made with reconstituted white pearls of tapioca. The menu described the dish as *"Sabayon" of Pearl Tapioca with Island Creek Oysters and Regiis Ova Caviar.* I have an oyster stew recipe

that is thickened with tapioca and tried convincing Jody that I'm a natural Thomas Keller...she wasn't buying it. She likes the Maryland version—oysters, milk, butter and celery salt—ho hum. When I said the dish had a generous portion of caviar, one of Chef Keller's philosophies is that most people are served things like truffles and caviar very frugally, so he gives a generous serving so that they can say, "Oh, now I get it." The *Oysters and Pearls* were my choice for the dish of the evening even after the other eight courses to follow. And then, as if to prove that he's not going to always leave 'em wanting more, Patrick immediately follows with...



"GREEN TOMATO CONSOMMÉ"

...the **second course** that is equally as much a staple on Chef Keller's, menus as the first. A dish that has also been one of his favorites for more than 25 years—*Green Tomato "Consommé"* described on the menu as *Tomato Water Gelée and Basil Infused Olive Oil*. Gelée is jelly (yes, I looked it up). Well, it didn't look like much from the standpoint of substantial, or filling, you know, "stick to your ribs"...a few diced tomatoes, herbs, etc., floating and at the bottom of a cup of consommé, but it passed the color test and the taste test with flying colors...and, well, flying tastes. Entirely understandable why it is one of Chef's faves. How many of us are not basil fans. And now, I am really wanting more.

So, Patrick now enters with fresh glasses and a bottle of *Paul Pillot Chassagne-Montrachet, "Mazures,"* Burgundy 2019 and as you might expect this white Burgundy is a bit more complex and anticipates two more dishes a little heavier than the first two. The winery describes this one as "a satiny and incisive wine that's evocative of citrus zest, freshly baked bread and crisp orchard fruit. Medium to full-bodied, vibrant and concentrated." Enter...



“APPLEWOOD SMOKED WILD KING SALMON”

...the **third course**, *“Applewood Smoked Wild King Salmon”* described on the menu as, *“Cauliflower Purée, Garden Beets, Sacramento Delta Green Asparagus and Ruby Beet Vinaigrette.”*

As those of you who use your smokers often already know, fruit wood imparts a milder and sweeter smoke flavor than the harsher woods such as hickory, oak, pecan, etc. and I learned from his cookbook that Chef Keller will often simmer (not poach) the smoked salmon in milk for a few minutes to relieve it of excess salt enabling the palate to enjoy

more of the salmon flavor. The asparagus and beets seemed to be the perfect complement.

Next up!



“SWEET BUTTER POACHED NOVA SCOTIA LOBSTER”

“Sweet butter poached nova scotia lobster served with wilted arrowleaf spinach, garden spring onion ‘A La Plancha’ and root vegetables mousseline.” “A La Plancha” means seared or charred. I failed to ask just what root vegetables were in the mousseline, but that it was white and flavorful I would venture to guess turnips or parsnips with onion, cooked, pureed, and then whipped cream folded in. Anyway, the lobster was perfectly tender and buttery, and the accompaniments did not detract at all but amplified the flavor. Mm, mm, mh!

And now, in the middle of our meal *“Bread and Butter”* described as *“butter cocoa laminated brioche and Diane St. Claire’s animal farm butter.”*



“BREAD AND BUTTER”

The preparation of this roll appeared to be as you would a cinnamon roll but sprinkled with dark chocolate powder, rolled up, cut to individual rolls and baked in muffin tins (my guess). The *Bread and Butter* seemed to serve as a palate cleanser and to signal a transition to more robust flavors including the duck and beef. Patrick brought out a bottle of *Caroline Morey, Cotes de Beaune, Les Greves, Les Cru Burgundy 2019* that preceded the *“Liberty Farms Pekin Duck ‘Presse’”*, with *toasted hazelnut butter, sweet poached rhubarb, garden oxalis* and *“Sauce Perigourdine”*.



“LIBERTY FARMS PEKIN DUCK ‘PRESSE’”

The “Presse” is in quotes for a reason as you can see by the photo. It’s hard to explain this one, but as you can see from the picture (zoom in) the duck appears to have been roasted then pulled and added to a mixture with gelatin, that appears to include risotto then baked to a sturdy consistency—wish I had asked more questions on this one. However it was prepared, it was delicious and the “Sauce Perigourdine” (made with black truffles) made it all the more so.

At this point Patrick gave us a little break, anticipating the **seventh course** and the wine “primo” of the evening. He later brought out a bottle of *ADAMVS, Cabernet Sauvignon, “TERES,” Howell Mountain 2016*. We immediately, after tasting, went online and ordered a case to split with our anniversary friends.

The **seventh course** was a choice of beef dishes. *Snake River Calotte de Bœuf* or charcoal grilled Japanese wagyu. Everyone at the table opted to forego the \$135 upcharge for the wagyu. We all have had wagyu and agreed it is a bit over-rated (for *our* palates at least) and we made a good choice with...



“SNAKE RIVER CALOTTE DE BŒUF”

After savoring a few sips of the *ADAMVS*, Patrick’s servers approached with the dish, and it did not disappoint. Served with *Yukon gold potatoes, pickled garden kohlrabi, preserved cucumbers and “Sauce Charcuterie”* we realized that the *ADAMVS* was perfectly paired for this dish.



GOUGÈRE

The **eighth course** *Gougère* is described on the menu as *Adante Dairy “Etude” and Black Winter Truffle “Fondue”*. Etude is an aged goat cheese with a firm texture, but creamy and not acidic. And the black truffle fondue...mmm, I can still taste this dish. This was still working so well with the *ADAMVS*.

Holy Moly! We cannot say we were not forewarned. The menu said the final course is an *ASSORTMENT OF DESSERTS—Fruit, Ice Cream, Chocolate, and Candies*. Well, this was a spread as you can see...



ASSORTMENT OF DESSERTS

I have to go easy on sweets, but this first one to follow, I could not resist.





And that my friends is a great dining experience!!!

MORE TO COME! In the meantime, **FELLOWS**, keep on cookin'.

“Creativity is inventing, experimenting, growing, taking risks, breaking rules, making mistakes, and having fun.” Mary Lou Cook