



SANTÉ RESTAURANT AND CHEF JARED REEVES

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

On a recent visit to Sonoma, California, I enjoyed a few nights at the enchanting Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa. While there, I savored tasty local wines, dined with a friend, and interviewed Executive Chef Jared Reeves at the Inn's fine dining establishment, Santé Restaurant.

How did your life in the kitchen begin?

I grew up with an older brother and a younger sister. My parents worked hard and late, but I must brag about my mom. She had three kids and put herself through college. She received her degree the same year I got my high school degree. We graduated together, and I was so proud she stuck with it. She would go to work and then to school.

At first, I was just the one to put chicken nuggets and fries in the oven. But over time, I got bored. I would find a recipe and ask mom to get the ingredients; it evolved from there. When I look back, my food was basic, but by the time I was 16, I started thinking about what I wanted to do for a career, and my first job was flipping burgers at Sonic. No commercial kitchen would hire me due to insurance reasons. It is a shame

because working in a professional kitchen can be an excellent apprenticeship opportunity for kids.

Where was your first commercial job?

My first commercial kitchen job was at The Marriott in Kansas City during my senior year. I gave up baseball at school to move forward in my culinary career.

How did you arrive in Sidney, Australia, from Kansas City?

I wanted to broaden my view of the world, so in high school, I saved up to go on a school trip to New Zealand, Australia, and Fiji. After graduation I was looking for a culinary school, and the Cordon Bleu in Sidney was the same price as those in the States. I figured I could always live in New York, and the school in Sidney seemed like a terrific opportunity. So, off I went, and my two-and-one-half-year-long trip turned into ten years.

What made you return to the United States?

I had been working at the Four Seasons in Sidney for the last three years that I was there. I was a sous chef at the time, and there were no open positions and little room for growth. At that time, a new Four Seasons was opening in New York, and I had always wanted to live there. By this time, I had a wife, and she had a list of requirements and places where she would like to live. I got the job of chef de cuisine. Here I learned to work with people and not just products. Everyone was new, and I had to train them all. I did that for two years.

How did you end up in Sonoma County?

A recruiter contacted me, and I flew over to check out Santé. It was always a dream of mine to work in wine country and create wine-focused meals. When people visit the wine country, they expect a wine and food culinary experience, not just food for sustenance.

I am familiar with making excellent food, but I get to explore my creative side here. Our guests at the Sonoma Mission Inn come to drink exceptional wine, eat fantastic food, and sit and sip by the firepit.

What is your philosophy on using the entire animal?

I love to give people the opportunity to try all parts of the animal. Using the entire animal is my due diligence, and I have found that some people are more open to trying new things than others. I want to remove the fear and pair the “newer” parts with more familiar ones. For instance, tonight, we are roasting the whole duck and serving it with the trimmings. Those trimmings are the hearts and gizzards. The gizzards are confited off until they are nice and tender, and we skewer the hearts and brush them with butter, which is delicious.

I read that your style is California Fusion. What does that mean to you?

I do not want to shy away from any cuisine, whether it is Japanese, Korean, or Middle Eastern, but first, it must be California cuisine. I had a supplier call the other day. I asked what do you have that my other suppliers don't. He said he had Spanish prawns and European sole. I said that is not what I am looking for. I get my products from local places. I don't attach a distance to it, but I find the best as close as possible.

What is your philosophy behind why you buy locally?

People flock to certain products because the local chefs have put those ingredients on a pedestal. I feel it is our duty as chefs to highlight those ingredients. If we don't do it, those products will never receive the elite status they deserve. It is the job of a skillful chef to figure out how to prepare ingredients, serve them, and elevate them.

For instance, California's halibut is dry. Halibut in Alaska has a much higher fat content due to the icy waters, so we wrestled with how to do a California halibut. We discovered that if we served it as tartar (raw), the leanness came through, and the flavors were terrific. That doesn't mean I don't like to use exceptional ingredients like wagyu beef, but with those things, I need to get out of the way and let them speak for themselves, but if you have something that presents more of a challenge, you must figure out how to make it unforgettable.

Do you try to challenge yourself between working with ingredients that require great skill and spectacular ones that do not?

It is a fun journey because I always think about the next ingredient to utilize.

Do you have a favorite ingredient?

Wine is amazing. However, I am obsessed right now with duck. There is so much you can do with it and all its parts.

Do you think working with food is an art or a craft?

That is a very debatable subject, but I believe it is a craft because, as a craft, you know how things come together. My views and opinions have changed to an extent through debates on this subject. For example, there is an art to architecture, but architecture is also a craft, and the product must be stable. But I can throw paint on a canvas and say it is art. With art, there does not have to be any stability to it.

Do you mean to say that anyone can learn it if it is a craft, but if it is art, they cannot?

Well, anyone can learn how to cook a nice meal at home. That is the craft, following instructions. But at some point, those instructions become knowledge, and you create your own instructions. For instance, you can give me a box of food or raw ingredients, and I will know what goes together well. Or I can taste something on the line and know that the dish needs more salt or acid. That is all about honing in and perfecting your craft. We never get perfect at our craft.

But when you put your spin on it, are you teetering into the art realm?

Yes, we could get into an intense philosophical discussion regarding the line between craft and art. That is where I go back to architecture because you still have to have that foundational knowledge. You cannot just throw a building out there and say it looks beautiful; it still has to stand.

Dinner

Our discussion and banter about craft vs. art continued for another half hour, and then Chef Reeves went into the kitchen to prepare our dinner. We began with California Uni Profiteroles with caramelized yogurt, cucumber, and wasabi. The puffs were light and flakey, and the uni smelled of the sea and boasted a creamy, buttery texture.

I enjoyed the Grilled Delta Asparagus with pork boudin noir (blood sausage), a fried duck egg, and garlic crumbs. Still, I really liked the Belfiore Burrata with spring peas, kohlrabi, horseradish, and pumpernickel croutons with a variety of fabulous textures.

My favorite was the Grilled Maitake Mushroom dish with eggplant caponata and cashew cheese, but the 7-Day Dry Aged Duck with fermented blueberry jus and trimmings was a close second.

It was a lovely dinner and an enjoyable interview with Chef Reeves. The Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn & Spa is a fabulous place to rest your head, sip fine wine, and dine on Chef Reeves's decadent craft, or is it art? ❖