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Carmel restaurants give food the artistic touch

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One hundred years ago, [Carmel-By-The-Sea](#) in California was started as a colony of artists, and to this day, the 60-plus restaurants in the one square mile of town are known for the artistic touch they give to food.

Take Rich Pepe, owner of three restaurants that reflect his Italian roots. His most upscale Carmel establishment, Vesuvio, serves not plain old artichokes, so plentiful in this area, but turns them into artichoke lollipops. Chef Pepe's ravioli can be served with his rich truffle gnocchi, in addition to the usual pastas, meats and fish. Anton & Michel restaurant has recently renovated its 36-year-old building making it now elegantly rustic in style, with floor-to-ceiling windows the better to see the beautiful Court of the Fountains just outside, which is one of Carmel's 45 secret courtyards. Chef Mark Simpson serves luxurious Kobe short ribs on polenta cakes, and keeps to the continental traditions of making your Caesar salad right at your table, as he also does with carving roast lamb and specializing in flamed desserts such as Bananas Foster, although he adds a generous scoop of vanilla ice cream to the latter just to vary that classic dish.

Although his touch of putting deliberately stained chair pads into Affina Food & Wine is questionable, Chef James Anderson has been bringing the most local coastal cuisine of nearby Monterey Bay he can find into the restaurant since he took over just a year ago. Acorn miso is one of the specialties in the cuisine he calls "progressive," and he pairs many dishes with Petit Payson wine, from a winemaker who is a former surfer. A jazz piano player adds ambience to dinner here, as does the huge photo of a car that was part of one of Carmel's concours events.

Casanova is called Carmel's most romantic restaurant, in part possibly because it was once owned by a woman named Aunt Fairybird, who cooked for Charlie Chaplin here. The restaurant, which looks like a little log cabin, has small cozy rooms decorated with year-round Christmas lights and fountains; one of them, the Van Gogh room, holds a dining table that was actually owned and used by Vincent Van Gogh and brought here from Provence. Chef David Baron's Gnocchi Casanova is made without flour but with pureed spinach and a Parmesan sauce and despite the rich sauce, is lighter than the traditional flour dumplings. Baron likes it served with a pinot grigio from Carmel Valley. Despite the feeling of intimacy in this establishment, the restaurant houses a wine cellar that holds 30,000 bottles. Pastas are homemade here, and the little restaurant also houses its own bakery.

The owners of Trio Carmel, a specialty shop of olive oils and vinegars, opened their store because they felt that California is moving more toward olives than grapes. Although they certainly offer wine to taste along with their oils and vinegars, the latter are the stars here, including specialty oils from Chile and balsamic vinegars infused with flavors not commonly tasted in vinegar: cinnamon, pears, blood orange, and mushroom. In their tastings, they bring innovation to oil and vinegar by serving some of these unusual combinations over sorbet, giving a totally new taste to dessert.

Terry's Lounge in the Cypress Inn, known for its long and imaginative list of classic cocktails introduced during Prohibition days of the 1920's, is just as artistic in its preparation of dinner food. Monterey Bay calamari are cooked in a tempura batter with Middle Eastern spices and harissa aioli. Brussels sprouts, usually boiled by unimaginative cooks and not very interesting, are grilled and served with crumbled bacon and sweet chili sauce by Chef Jonathan Bagley, making them a favorite dish at this restaurant, along with truffle-mushroom ravioli including sautéed portobello mushrooms in a diced red pepper, green onion and saffron cream sauce. Most famous for its cocktails regardless of the food, though, Terry's Lounge capitalizes on that continuing popularity by using a Humphrey Bogart quote in its advertisements that reads "The problem with the world is that everyone is a few drinks behind."

Walnut gelato is one of the charming desserts served at Cantinetta Luca, a pizza and pasta restaurant that lists no fewer than a dozen different after-dinner liquors and five dessert wines, among them Fizz 56 from Piemonte and Donnafugata Ben Rye Passito di Pantelleria in Sicily.

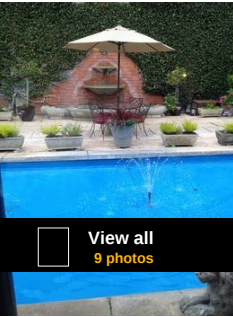
Among the town's 75 wine tasting rooms, Caraccioli Cellars proudly offers tastes of its \$52 per bottle 2014 Chardonnay, which won "Best Sparkling Wine in the USA" honors, and uses yeast instead of carbonation in its sparkling wines. The family-run vineyard, which produces just 3500 cases per year in both red and white wines, also offers still wines. Its 2011 Pinot Noir, at \$47 per bottle, has hints of raspberry, blueberry, blackberry, dark cassis, black cherry and even cola. It has a velvety texture and a big, rich, intense mouth feel.

Another family-owned business, Lula's Chocolates, features chocolate covered caramels, among other sweets, with just a touch of sea salt on top for a delicious taste combination of sweet and savory.

Only in Carmel would you find a wine tasting room together with an art gallery, but Winfield Gallery has both, and its owners boast that "visitors will enjoy a one-of-a-kind tasting experience that touches all five senses."

Carmel Gourmet Food Tours have only been running for the last three years. These cover seven eateries and gourmet food stores and a wine tasting. Coming soon is a Gimme a Break Fast Tour that will be a walking, cultural tasting tour revolving around morning foods and beverages. For more information go to www.carmelfoodtour.com

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Julie Hatfield



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