

PANAMA HOTEL IS A TUCKED-AWAY TREASURE

Leslie Harlib

PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS asking me where they should head for a special occasion dinner in downtown San Rafael.

"Not ethnic," they say. "We want just a good American meal with style, something a little different."

They'll find it at the Panama Hotel. The stucco-and-glass building with its cunning balconies has been a Gerstle Park fixture since 1910, a restaurant since 1937 and hostelry since the 1970s, when a bohemian couple with a love of collecting vintage tableware and kitsch bought the adjoining building and turned it into a boarding house and cafe.

Panama's current owner Dan Miller and his family bought the establishment in 1984. They brought it up to speed as a bed-and-breakfast hotel with adjacent restaurant.

Four years ago, I reviewed the Panama for dinner and liked it. Damian Salza took over the kitchen six months ago and is putting his own spin on the hotel's tradition of serving California cuisine with Mexican and Italian accents, so it was time to take another taste.

I forgot just how embracing and fun it is simply to sit in the Panama's dining room—that is, if you choose not to eat at one of the four tables under heat lamps (so necessary in these chilled weeks) in the hotel's light-filled, plant-rich greenhouse entry area. It's a charming spot for lunch or dinner in warmer weather.

The square dining room, with its four anchoring pillars, is covered in rosy paint that, together with the gold-toned lighting, makes everyone look healthy. Densely textured stucco walls are as thickly frosted as a wedding cake with vintage artifacts such as masks, tea pots, tea cups, commemorative plates, salt and pepper shakers and vases, not to mention dozens of old photographs.

Tables are crisply dressed in white cloths with white paper laid on top; the type of paper at which the film producers from New Zealand sitting at the next table might be sketching out a scene or a treatment, as they were on the night my companion and I dined and we shamelessly eavesdropped on their shop talk. The Panama was once popular with the film community, the hostess said.

I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't still. The hotel is tucked away in San Rafael's most delightful, Victorian-rich residential neighborhood. It's not a place you'd find unless you went looking for it. You feel as if you're onto something just by walking in the door.



Nancy Rosa (left) and Catherine Takeuchi of San Rafael dine at the Panama Hotel in San Rafael. (|| photo/Alan Dep)

The one-page menu, which makes no distinction between starters and main dishes—you have to figure out which is which by the cost of the plates—changes monthly. It emphasizes local produce and ingredients, including organic meats and poultry, but not every dish has a pedigree—you have to ask if the salmon is wild or farmed.

Prices are on the high side, though there are compensations for the fact that rack of lamb, one of the most expensive dishes, is \$27 for three small double chops, and that a single Dungeness crab cake—admittedly one of the best I've ever eaten—is \$10. What makes the pricing at least understandable is a level of service a cut above what I find in most Marin restaurants.

One of the highlights? When your meal is ready, if you are with a party larger than two, the entire dining room staff from hostess to bussers come to the table at once, each carrying a dish so no one person in a group is served before anyone else. That's classy.

A one-page wine and beer list features California vintages plus a few draft and bottled beers from here and abroad. There are 34 wines by the glass, \$7 to 12.50, with excellent vintages available. If you ask, you can get a half-portion, a little taste before you make up your mind. It's a clever sales technique. I ordered a half-glass of oakey, chocolatey, berry-rich Christie zinfandel from Dry Creek Valley, 2004 (\$11.50 full). It proved to be so delicious, I wound up making it a full serving.

Two of the Panama's starters were among the tastiest tidbits I've enjoyed in years. First, there was that amazing crab cake, which, like a fire hydrant, was taller than it was wide.

People may argue the merits of what makes for a delicious crab cake. I might be dissed for preferring simple by the folks who like spice and zip. Panama's crab cake is my ideal: pretty much pure Dungeness crab, flakes and nuggets, held together perhaps by prayer or song to form a 2-inch tall knob that's been breaded and beautifully fried so the soft, sweet crab is cosseted by that thin, firm crust. That's it. Almost no seasoning, hints of salt and citrus just to pull up the seafood flavor, and who needs more? This is about crab, with a little dazzle provided by a bed of roasted red pepper aioli and a curl or two of microgreens.

Then there was a supernal soup: Maria's pueblo chicken tortilla soup, \$7 for an enormous bowl. It's hard for me to get excited by soup. But Maria's chicken tortilla soup is really a small meal contained in broth, a lovely, cilantro-scented tomatoey chicken broth whispering of lime, chunky with chicken nuggets, fresh avocado, corn

kernels, sautéed onions and sprinkled with queso fresco that melted into and enriched the brick-hued liquid. Strips of toasted corn tortilla at first provided crunch; they softened and added even more body to this lovely mlangé. I couldn't stop eating it.

The fire-roasted poblano chili (\$10), once stuffed with chicken and cheese, is now vegetarian. A dark green, fiercely assertive fresh chili was stuffed with quinoa, minced mushrooms, goat cheese and pine nuts, baked, then coated in a thick smoky chili sauce dotted with crema fresca. It's a great combination if you like hot food, but its burn was too much for me.

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Baja seafood salad, an entrée salad at \$16, looked like a huge portion of food and sounded different than anything else in Marin. This was about hot grilled chunks of salmon, whole shrimp and a couple of scallops, layered over romaine—way too much romaine—with whole black beans, a fan of avocado slices, finely chopped tomatoes, corn and a cilantro lime vinaigrette. It sounded like a great idea; it didn't work for me. In this county where

wonderful mixed greens are so easy to come by, why use this much romaine outside the domain of Caesar salad? The scallops were on the rubbery side, though the salmon and shrimp were moist and cooked just right. This is not a fattening dish, but it wasn't exciting, either.

Australian rack of lamb (\$27) replaced, on our recent visit, what is still the hotel's best entrée: lamb shank (\$22), a gargantuan chunk of fork-soft braised meat in a rich tomato and onion sauce with simple, fluffy polenta. The rack was three small double chops, rare as we requested, prettily arranged on a plate with their Frenched bones intertwining above a scoop of workmanlike mashed potatoes and carrot batons. Daubs of pesto sauce dressed up the plate, adding dazzle to what otherwise was a fancy way of serving meat and potatoes.

Looking around the dining room, I noticed that the Panama burger and fries (\$14) was hugely popular. Though we didn't try it, this looked like an impressive 12-ounce meat patty, thick as a steak, served with cheese, heirloom tomatoes, applewood-smoked bacon on a La Brea bakery bun with a chili aioli.

Other dishes include seafood tagliariani pasta with mussels, clams, prawns and scallops in a tomato cream sauce with fresh basil (\$22); grilled fillet of salmon with braised leeks, tarragon aioli, roasted new potatoes and asparagus (\$18); bacon-wrapped Stone Creek Ranch organic filet mignon with guajillo chili rum reduction, grilled asparagus and Panama fries (\$29); gorgonzola and walnut ravioli in rosemary cream sauce (\$16).

Our excellent server, who kept checking in to give us a progress report on when our next course would be coming (another nice touch; we felt noticed), told us all the desserts were made-in house, from scratch.

They tasted like it, and for the money and size of the portion, were good value. Molten chocolate cupcake with vanilla and mocha crème anglaise (\$7) was a chubby one, spreading out over the plate when cut with a slow ooze of fudge. Wonderfully unsweet, it showcased dark chocolate flavor. Meyer lemon tart with whipped cream and boysenberry sauce was rife with that flowery quality typical of true Meyer lemons, but it was almost smothered in assertive purple sauce. Ask for the boysenberry topping on the side, then you can balance the flavors to your own taste. Other desserts include cheesecake, seasonal fruit crisp, bread and butter pudding and a hot fudge sundae.

While the bill was expensive, and not all the dishes wowed us, we went away with the feeling that we'd had a memorable night out. Panama Hotel really is a special place. I hope Damian Salza stays a long time and develops the menu into the seasonal showcase it can be.

If you dine Tuesday and Thursday nights, there's live vintage jazz in a corner of the dining room. The hostess said that even though there's not much more room to dance on the red-carpeted floor than on a pocket handkerchief, some couples are still inspired to cut the rug. So take those evenings into account if you want an extra-festive night out.

PANAMA HOTEL

4 Bayview Street, San Rafael

Phone 457-3993

Website www.panamahotel.com

Cuisine American with Mexican accents

Service Excellent, competent, stylish

Noise level Moderate, pleasant, vintage background jazz

Recommended dishes Dungeness crab cake; lamb shank with polenta; molten chocolate cupcake

Liquor selection Wine and beer

Corkage \$15

Heart-healthy and vegetarian selections A few

Parking Free street parking

Wheelchair access Yes

Hours Lunch 11:30am to 2:30pm weekdays;

Dinner 5:30 to 9:30pm Tuesdays to Sundays; Sunday Brunch 10am to 2pm.

Credit cards Visa, MasterCard, American Express

Summary One of Marin's oldest continually operating restaurants is also one of its most charming. The Panama Hotel has been home to a restaurant since 1937. Its current incarnation is filled with warm colors and texture from vintage artifacts and background taped jazz. The menu changes monthly and features California cuisine as well as Mexican-influenced dishes. It's one of the most fun places to eat in Central Marin, even if on the pricey side. There's live jazz on Tuesday and Thursday nights.

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