

UPDATE *By Michael Bauer*

# Sante still a standout at Sonoma Mission Inn

Hotel and corporate restaurants can be dicey propositions for diners. Chefs come and go and the public may never know. It's difficult enough to create a consistent meal with the same team every night, and when a chef changes there's even more likelihood the meal will be different.

Maybe that's the reason that if you look at places like Etoile at Domaine Chandon you won't see the name of the chef on the Web site. The same is true of Sante in the Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn, which has housed several concepts and chefs over the years.

However, this year it became the only place in the Sonoma Valley to earn a Michelin star, thanks to the work of executive chef Bruno Tison, who has been at the property since 2003, and Andrew Cain, who has been in charge of the restaurant kitchen for three years.

Cain has created an a la carte menu that allows diners to pick and choose,

or head full bore into a \$95 tasting menu. The best deal is the \$49 three-course menu, available Monday through Thursday and featuring many choices from the regular menu. Ordered a la carte, appetizers are \$10 to \$18; mains, \$28 to \$48; and desserts, \$10 to \$12.

On our recent Update 100 Boyles Drive (in the Fairmont Sonoma Mission Inn and Spa), Sonoma (707) 938-9000 or Fairmont.com Dinner 6-9:30 p.m. nightly. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Free valet parking at dinner.

visit, the three-course menu started with an amuse: a stemmed glass filled with silken white bean soup with a bright Christmas green ring of basil oil, accompanied by a quarter-size brioche toast topped with seafood salad. In the center of the plate was a little pile of carrot dust with intense sweetness of the vegetable that could be sprinkled on either item.

Cain has the right formula for sauteing sweet-breads, little squares that are golden and crisp with a soft almost custard-like interior. He pairs them with tender escargot, wisps of fried parsley and feathery clumps of fried garlic in a pool of herb-flecked butter sauce with polka dots of velvety white onion soubise, each with a drop of basil oil in the center. Rings of pickled red onions, about the circumference of jalapeno chiles, bring a needed sweet, acidic kick to the blend.

The parsnip soup tastes as if the earthy sweet flavors of the root vegetable had been concentrated and then smoothed with a little cream. A waiter pours the soup into a bowl containing a mound of pecans, blue cheese and tiny dices of apple topped with sprigs of herbs and a dried ring of apple; the chopped ingredients disperse into the creamy soup, adding contrast and interest.

Main courses are substantial and well executed

including thick slices of pork tenderloin with the hearty texture of beef, garnished with delicate chervil. The meat is fanned over a bed of Israeli cous-cous flecked with herbs and tiny dices of carrots, in a natural juice sauce.

The fish was only slightly less successful. Local cod was blanketed with brandade and surrounded by stacks of sliced turnips, artichokes and oven-dried tomatoes, with pools of Meyer lemon beurre blanc. The combination made sense, but someone got too excited with the salt shaker.

Butterscotch tart, more like a moist round cake set on two square swipes of caramel sauce, ended the meal on a high note. A quenelle of housemade Cafe Brulot ice cream, and a crisp tuille capped the tart, creating a dessert with complexity and the right amount of sweetness. A chocolate dessert included a dry financier and a rubbery panna cotta, but those were the

only missteps in the meal.

In fact, the food bests the other elements of the dining experience. Staff

members are young and somewhat tentative, although it's clear they are well trained.

The dining room, which overlooks the resort's swimming pool, feels a bit disjointed, mainly because of the somewhat uncomfortable wicker chairs that might promote the spa feel of the place but that seem incongruous with what Cain is producing.

Still, with Cain in the kitchen, it doesn't really matter.

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<b>Overall</b>	★★★
Food	★★★
Service	★★★
Atmosphere	★★½
Prices	\$\$\$\$
Noise Rating	▲

