

CHAPTER 1

Resort Dining

A resort is the first destination of most Palm Springs visitors. The definition of the word “resort” is so loose it can mean almost anything, from the Ritz-Carlton to a Motel 6. Here in the Coachella Valley it has come to be identified with something more specific. Our resorts are complete destinations in themselves. Once you set foot on the property of Marriott’s Desert Springs, for example, you find all of your dining, sporting, and recreational needs met on the premises. You never need to leave. Virtually all local resorts include multiple swimming pools, tennis courts, gyms, boutique shopping, entertainment, and spa treatments. In addition, the resorts of the Coachella Valley have golf courses—often more than one.

Most of the major resorts boast several dining choices in a range of prices, but visitors who are not experienced with the area may be “trapped” in their resort. Their first option, and certainly the easiest—the resort’s own restaurants—may often not satisfy the needs and desires of the discriminating diner. And resort dining generally provides neither the most interesting nor the best-prepared cuisine in the area. Prices are often higher as well, but management is well aware of the limited knowledge of its clientele.

DORAL DESERT PRINCESS

67-967 Vista Chino

Cathedral City

Resort: ★★★

Of the resorts in the Palm Springs area, this is the only one that can be classified as “budget.” A room at the Doral can be had for the price of an upscale motel room when negotiated via the Internet. With 27 holes of golf, a large pool with a spectacular view of Mount San Jacinto, tennis, spa treatments, and a lounge with dancing and entertainment, the Doral can fulfill most vacation needs except fine dining. The lone dining option, Fairway Café, adequate at best, has the look and feel of an upscale coffee

shop. The resort is located between Rancho Mirage and Palm Springs, where dining choices abound. For tourists who are driving, this is not a problem, but its location off the beaten path leaves tourists who are not driving with few options. The Fairway Café serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner with an American menu, some Italian pastas, and lots of comfort food—a trendy mix and match. Prices are moderate. It is not recommended.

HYATT GRAND CHAMPIONS

44-600 Indian Wells Lane

Indian Wells

Resort: ★★ ★½

A few years ago the Hyatt was home to the Indian Wells Tennis Tournament, but with the construction of the Tennis Gardens just a mile east, the resort's name has become an anachronism. Still it lingers. The facilities for international tennis competition were removed and the hotel expanded. Since the first edition of this book it has been expanded again, and the restaurant, formerly the Santa Rosa Grill, has been upgraded and renamed Lantana.

The Hyatt shares an entrance with the Renaissance Esmeralda next door (reviewed later in this chapter). Hyatt guests veer left; Esmeralda, right. Golf courses engulf both properties. The Hyatt excels in swimming facilities with seven pools, one with a water slide for the children (well, not *just* for the children). The grounds are more elaborate and intimate than those of its neighbor, the Esmeralda, whose single pool becomes uncomfortably packed with children on major holidays. The building itself is quite beautiful with gorgeous views, especially north and west facing, from the upper floors.

Lantana

★½

\$\$\$

Location: inside the Hyatt Grand Champions, 44-600 Indian Wells Lane, Indian Wells, 674-4165. **Food type:** California eclectic and pizza; bar menu in the Pianissimo Lounge. **Ambiance:** (see text). **Bar:** full. **Reservations:** suggested. **Hours:** breakfast, lunch, dinner daily.

The Lantana's patio is quite lovely. Views are of the golf course to the north with rolling hills, palm trees, flowers, and cacti. A stone floor, sun

screens overhead, misters and heaters, and earth tones provide a perfect environment for al fresco dining. Inside does not fare as well. One large room is partitioned by a half-wall, allowing for an upholstered bench on either side and tables spotted at regular intervals. Independent tables and chairs occupy the remaining space. The feel is more coffee shop than fine dining.

The food has improved but is still overpriced and uninteresting. This resort is adjacent to the Renaissance Esmeralda with its 4-star-rated Sirocco and across the street from the Miramonte with its 3-star-rated Grove Artisan Kitchen (both reviewed in this chapter). Unless one chooses to sit at the bar (Pianissimo Lounge) to watch a game and nosh on a pizza, one would be better served by taking a short and rather delightful walk. The pizzas are both intriguing and reasonably priced. In addition to the usual “carnivore” and “herbivore” varieties, there are two more creative offerings: the “Lantana” (chicken, beets, goat cheese, tomatoes) and the “Bistro 5th Avenue” (Italian sausage, spinach, ricotta, and oven-dried tomatoes). At \$13 and \$14 dollars, respectively, these are also reasonable buys.

To those who place a high value on convenience and are unwilling to make the short walk to the highly rated neighboring restaurants, here is a sample of the kitchen’s product. It is from the breakfast menu, and it is called “Cactus Cove.” My server claimed it was the premier item on the breakfast menu. It is a scramble with lobster, chives, and mascarpone cheese. Its cost is \$17, and it sounds much better than it is. The lobster itself is excellent, and it is rather generous. Claw meat is dominant, but there is nothing wrong with that. The cheese, however, is so mild as to be lost in the mix. A stronger cheese would destroy the subtle flavor of the lobster, but the mascarpone contributes nothing. The chives also add nothing but a splash of green color. The eggs simply serve as a carrier for the rest of the ingredients, while the quartered red potatoes, incorrectly advertised as “roasted fingerlings,” are heavily sprinkled with what tastes remarkably like Lawry’s seasoning salt. This spicy salt was created in 1938 for Lawry’s Prime Rib restaurant in Beverly Hills. It was probably a gourmet delight in 1938, but now it tastes quite dated and the potatoes are so heavily seasoned with it that the spice overwhelms the dish. The lobster cannot possibly compete with the seasoning. One is forced to eat the lobster independently of everything else on the plate. A small half-tomato, along with choice of toast, is the only garnish.

Intrinsic quality of the food is good. Preparation is fine. However, the recipes are poorly thought out, and the quantity of food is skimpy. I was

not hungry when I left, but I was not satisfied either. Coffee is excellent (Starbucks). My total bill for this breakfast was \$25. I could have gone to Sunshine Café (see Chapter 15) twice for \$25 and experienced twice the quality and twice the quantity.

LA QUINTA RESORT AND CLUB

49-499 Eisenhower Dr.

La Quinta

Resort: ★★★★★

When you first pull into the driveway of the La Quinta Resort and Club you are struck with a certain déjà vu. Perhaps this is a villa in Cannes. You glance around half expecting to see the Mediterranean. The “driveway” is a quarter mile long. Off in the distance you notice some buildings—a Mediterranean estate?

This resort was built in 1926 as a secret getaway—or was it a rendezvous?—for Hollywood celebrities, a mini Hearst Castle without the ostentation. There are no Greek temples, million-gallon lakes, boat taxis, or Babylonian gardens. This is quiet elegance, exploding with bougainvillea, tucked into the craggy foothills of the Santa Rosa Mountains. Nothing is immediately visible. How do they manage to hide three golf courses? Where are the swimming pools—all 43 of them—the tennis courts? Where are the rooms for that matter? Isn't this a hotel? Who knows? The guests of the La Quinta Resort and Club like it that way. Quiet, please. In 1926, the resort was 30 miles east of nowhere and probably required a passport. The resort is part of the Waldorf Astoria Collection.

Morgan's in the Desert

★★★★★ (see text)

\$\$\$

Location: 49-499 Eisenhower Dr., La Quinta, 777-4925. **Food type:** “elegant American casual dining.” **Ambiance:** upgraded 1926 adobe building with lovely heated and misted patio. **Bar:** full; extensive wine list. **Lounge:** piano bar. **Reservations:** suggested. **Hours:** dinner nightly. **Chef:** Jimmy Schmidt. **Sommelier:** Francois Cinq-Mars.

Longtime valley residents will recognize the Morgan name. Prior to

2002, the current La Quinta Resort restaurant, Twenty6 (reviewed later in this chapter), operated as Morgan's Steakhouse. Between the exit of the first Morgan's and the emergence of Morgan's in the Desert, the fine-dining and very expensive Azur existed in the new Morgan's venue.

The superb Jimmy Schmidt was brought on board when his four-star restaurant, Rattlesnake, closed in the last month of 2009 (now reopened as Ballatrix; see Chapter 7), as this book was going into final edit. Consequently I have not had a chance to dine at the new Morgan's; however, I am thoroughly familiar with Jimmy Schmidt's cooking. I have made the assumption that the chef's cooking is still of four-star quality. It is, of course, possible that it is not, but all evidence is to the contrary. I am including an excerpt of my review of Rattlesnake at the Classic Club, the aforementioned recent closure, as well as my review of Schmidt's former casino restaurant. This will provide some idea of the culinary skills of the chef.

Schmidt is one of the more renowned chefs in America. He has worked with the likes of Jacques Pepin, Wolfgang Puck, Mark Miller, Alice Waters, and Larry Forgione. He is the winner of the James Beard Award for Best Regional Chef. His originality and range are startling. The chef first came to the desert under contract with the Trump 29 Casino (now called Spotlight 29) in 2002. The restaurant he opened in that casino, called Rattlesnake, as is his flagship restaurant in Detroit, was featured in the first edition of this book. At that time I only gave the restaurant three and a half stars for the simple reason that Mr. Schmidt was not there most of the time. This new restaurant will boast the presence of the great chef most everyday, both lunch and dinner, except summers, when he will return to Detroit. It is arguable that Jimmy Schmidt is the finest chef in the Coachella Valley. There are many first-rate chefs—Omri, Copley, Bacher, Janin, Maddock, Pelech, Lair, Wadlund, Dervieux, Cultraro, and Massignani—but they do not share the hard edge of boundless creativity that Schmidt brings to the culinary art.

At the Classic Club's Rattlesnake, I reviewed two dishes in 2009. As I extolled in my review: "Linguini is actually celery heart shredded to resemble pasta. It looks the part but provides a crunch and deep flavor profile that is entirely different. Fried sage leaves and pieces of roasted butternut squash provide differing textures as well as sweetness to balance the acidity of the celery. Fresh chanterelle mushrooms in a porcini cream sauce tie it all together, providing a depth and earthiness to the sweet/acidic

crunch. It is an amazing dish not remotely like anything else in the area.

“Deep-sea scallops, seemingly plucked from the ocean only moments ago, are dusted with ground coriander and seared in blisteringly hot oil. The centers are raw and redolent of the salty depths; the surface is a sweet caramelized contrast to the orangey-lemony-peppery tang of coriander bouncing around. These are served with a risotto accented with fennel shavings. A sprinkling of micro greens provides a missing bitterness and the whole thing is gilded with a Parmigiano-Reggiano foam—really quite remarkable!”

The menu at the new Morgan's is considerably less daring and creative than that of the Rattlesnake establishments, and prices are also commensurately lower. Steaks, rack of lamb, duck breast, and seafood ranging from diver scallops and lobster to mahi mahi and ahi tuna form the backbone of the menu. Small plates encompass such things as beet salad, carpaccio, and “seared salt and pepper crusted foie with caramelized Anjou pear and wild mushrooms.” Prices are substantially lower than they were at Azur with appetizers now averaging \$13, and entrees, \$27.

The wine list, emphasizing California, is extensive and covers all bases, but average prices are high. Red wines range from a low of \$38 for a 2007 A-Z Pinot Noir to well over \$100 for a number of California Cabernets. The mean price is around \$80.

(Below is the review I wrote for the casino restaurant in 2004.)

No, this is not an organization for dysfunctional rattlesnakes. And, no, they do not serve filet of rattlesnake on herbed polenta. Master American chef Jimmy Schmidt, winner of the James Beard Award for Best Regional Chef in 1993 and 2000 chairman of the Chef's Collective, of which the likes of Jacques Pepin and Wolfgang Puck are members, founded the original Rattlesnake in Denver in 1985 followed by the one in Detroit 1988. When Spotlight 29 opened, Rattlesnake made its debut in the desert. Schmidt is one of America's great chefs. He received two French culinary diplomas and graduated first in his class from Madeleine Kamman's Modern Gourmet cooking school in Boston. He became executive chef at Detroit's London Chop House in 1977 at the age of 22. This puts him in his 50s now, but with his boyish good looks and charm he appears about 35. However, while Jimmy Schmidt is the founding

force behind Rattlesnake and his recipes are served, he is not the chef on a day-to-day basis. On the day I visited Rattlesnake, a special charitable event, Mr. Schmidt was in charge of the kitchen.

Tiny Taste Adventures is an appetizer of choice, amalgams of goat cheese and lobster on crunchy little toasted crackers. A palate pleaser or teaser, you might say. Diver sea scallops, lightly crusted, more like dusted, with mushrooms (flavor not pronounced enough to identify type of mushroom), are served in a garlic custard. Custard is milk thickened with sweetened egg yolks, a mixture most often associated with desserts, but here, infused with a lot of garlic, it becomes a bed upon which the scallops rest. The dulcet crustaceans are flawlessly cooked, nary a hint of dryness. On this garlicky flan you might expect oversweetness, but the ingenious Chef Schmidt sprinkles the little gems with some delicate bitter greens. In addition, this course is served (in a wine-pairing *prix fixe*) with a grassy young Sauvignon Blanc. The intense grass flavor of the wine and the bitterness of the greens offered the most marvelous counterpoint to the custard and fish. I tasted the wine before tasting the scallops and was startled, especially having just finished a glass of Chardonnay. This was eccentric, even bizarre, but with the scallops all the diverse flavors came together.

Lacquered loin of wild boar on a fresh corn tamale with a Vidalia onion jam is a less successful dish. The wild boar is a mean, tusked, occasionally carnivorous wild pig. It is not as tender as its domestic relative. It can be braised for hours, but then it becomes stringy. Or it can be cooked quickly like a steak, in which case it remains tough. This boar was cooked quickly. Why not use pork tenderloin? The sweet corn tamale proved to be too sweet for the overall dish, especially when coupled with the onion marmalade. As a counterbalance this meat is served with a fascinating sauce. It is tangy, smoky, and tannic. Jimmy Schmidt just happened to be passing by my table, and I asked him about the sauce. He smiled enigmatically and said simply that it was a wine reduction. I smiled enigmatically, too, and gestured for more information. He said, "Strawberries, honey, and chipotle." That explained the smokiness. Outside of this context, I would not criticize this dish, but I expect only the best from a chef of such renown.

A small Prime filet mignon, about four ounces, comes topped with a glorious piece of foie gras. The filet was a perfect medium rare and served with a rosemary-onion potato gratin. A Cabernet reduction was drizzled about the meat. This dish ranks with the scallops in the flawless category.

Many Berry *Financière* Raspberry Sassafras Sorbet is a palate-cleansing respite from the complexity of the previous courses. Chocolate, fresh berries, and the cold sorbet work their magic with a sweet 2002 Moscato. It worked well enough, but I'd have preferred something more aggressive, such as a Botrytis Riesling or an ice wine, but St. Supéry, the vineyard of the evening, does not make these.

The fact that Jimmy Schmidt is not here on a regular basis does not seem to affect the loyalty of the regular customers, who wax ecstatically about both the originality and consistency of the food.

Adobe Grill

★★★

\$\$\$

Location: 49-499 Eisenhower Dr., La Quinta, 564-5725. **Food type:** Mexican fine dining. **Ambiance:** second-floor Mexican hacienda; patio; beautiful view; often with live music. **Bar:** full, with emphasis on margaritas and Mexican beer; small wine list. **Reservations:** suggested. **Hours:** dinner nightly.

Adobe is something one does not encounter very often—a truly high-end Mexican restaurant. There are none of the usual Mexican fast-food offerings many have come to identify as the essence of Mexican food. The ubiquitous taco-enchilada-burrito trio is not available at Adobe. What is served here is a menu you would encounter in an upscale restaurant in Mexico City. For many Americans, it is a revelation to find out that Mexican means so much more than that trio of fast food accompanied by a generic splat of rice and beans.

Not everything served at Adobe is wonderful, but many things are. The cold appetizer *tostaditas de ceviche* is not one of them. Ceviche is raw fish “cooked” in a citric acid, usually lime juice, with peppers and various herbs and spices. Ceviche is touchy. “Cook” it too long and it gets tough. Store it too long and it gets tougher. At Adobe the fish—in this case only halibut—sits in the marinade for eight hours so is tough and a bit stringy. The best ceviches I have tasted have been “cooked” for two hours. Too, halibut is not the fish recommended by most Mexican chefs with whom I have spoken. It takes on lime flavor at the expense of its own flavor. This dish is served on a bed of too-sweet guacamole resting on a crispy corn *tostadita*.

More successful is the way the complex variety of ingredients in the

ensalada tropical work together. Mixed greens, mostly the mildly bitter and peppery arugula, are tossed with jicama, fresh papaya, toasted pumpkin seeds, slices of mandarin orange, and crumbled ranchera cheese in an orange-shallot dressing. Jicama has almost no flavor, but its texture, like that of a hard, fresh apple, offers the first layer of counterpoint to the arugula. Add to this the papaya—soft and sweet—in contrast to the jicama. Pumpkin seeds bring a nutty and spicy punch to the party. Everything is different. Everything works together. The ranchera cheese is mild, similar to a dry ricotta, and the oranges and dressing bring a subtle acidity and sweetness.

You have to question its “Mexicanness,” but the *Halibut Empanisado* is truly a revelation. The fish is crusted with crushed pecans and maple syrup. The flesh retains its juicy tenderness, and surprisingly, the pecan-maple crust works beautifully with and against the fish. Anointing the halibut is a mildly sweet orange-blossom sauce. It is served on a bed of Mexican pasta with a medley of Mexican vegetables—jicama, carrots, zucchini, onions—all blanched. To be really picky, the carrots could have been cooked a little longer, as the jicama and zucchini reach the perfect level of doneness earlier than the carrots.

Camarones Al Estilo Adobe is another entrée that reaches a level of perfection. Jumbo shrimp in a marinade of lime juice, cilantro, and cumin are grilled and served in a unique sauce of garlic, butter, lime juice, cream, pumpkin seeds, and sweet peppers. It is tangy, aggressive, slightly sweet, rich, and garlicky all at the same time. Served with a Mexican version of risotto—less creamy than Italian risotto and redolent of chili powder—this rice manages to be the perfect accompaniment *and* retains its Mexican authenticity at the same time. Less successful is the traditional chicken breast with mole sauce. The *mole negro* (chocolate) is highly Americanized. The use of nuts, raisins, coriander, pumpkin seeds, and dessert spices are unusual enough in savory cooking, but it is bitter chocolate in a brutally hot sauce that makes mole unique. Pasilla chilies, mulato chilies, and ancho chilies are the basis for that heat. This mole has all the complexity that that recipe would indicate, but it is too sweet and does not come close to the level of heat a traditional chocolate mole should have. That fact, however, does not prevent it from having an exceptional flavor. A *mole verde*, also accompanying the chicken breast, is considerably less interesting. If ordering this dish, ask only for the

chocolate. Another problem with the dish is its use of chicken breast, one of the most unfortunate trends in American cuisine. Food Network chef Mario Batali calls it the most “overrated food in America.” Moles are traditionally served in Mexico with turkey or pork. A tender, rich, juicy turkey thigh would be a vast improvement to the ubiquitous dried-out and over-grilled chicken breast.

In contrast, the Yucatan rack of lamb is a fascinating take on this hugely popular entrée. Lamb, especially the baby ribs, is subtle meat. It usually cannot stand up to an aggressive treatment, and this is very aggressive. A date *reposado* (literally “rested”) is used as a marinade for the meat. Annato paste, garlic, cilantro, orange juice, cumin, and fresh, locally grown Deglet Noor dates are the base of this marinade. The rack is then baked and served with a sauce of Ancho chili reduction. It comes with a roasted corn and date tamale. The flavors are exquisite, but they come at the expense of the lamb. The dish is too interesting to pass up, but be sure to order the lamb rare as it is more assertive that way. Chef Leanne Kamekona, who was with the resort for many years, created this prizewinning recipe. Kamekona is currently executive chef at the Rancho Las Palmas Resort, reviewed later in this chapter.

Twenty6

★★★

\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Location: 49-499 Eisenhower Dr., La Quinta, 564-5720. **Food type:** American. **Ambiance:** Mediterranean villa. **Bar:** full; adequate wine list. **Reservations:** suggested for dinner. **Hours:** breakfast, lunch, dinner, and room service daily 6 A.M. to midnight. **Chef:** Chris Swenson.

Like its companion restaurant upstairs, Twenty 6 delivers several superb entrées but falls short with others. It is difficult to assign stars to these restaurants. Some dishes are easily four stars while others struggle to make two. I give them three, but it is important for the reader to follow the recommendations lest you wind up with one of the two-star offerings.

“Twenty6” refers to the year the resort was built, 1926. See Chapter 15 for more information on Twenty6’s breakfast offerings and a bit of background on its chef, Chris Swenson.

In the appetizer department, the Connoisseur crab cake reigns supreme. It

is easily one of the three best cakes in the desert. The cake itself is mostly—I would estimate somewhere in the 90 percent range—jumbo lump Maryland crab. You can discern flavors of bell peppers of at least two varieties, a dash of cayenne (too small a dash in my opinion), parsley, onion, and Dijon mustard. A *rémoulade* of mayonnaise, parsley, chervil, capers, shallots, lemon, and vinegar garnishes. It is reminiscent of a tarter sauce, but don't tell Swenson I said that. This is tart and tangy, so it is counterbalanced with a fascinating tomato jam. (See Chapter 15 for more details.)

The bacon and bean stew is also a winner although perhaps a little heavy as an appetizer. Order a cup not a bowl. This is made with applewood-smoked Nueske bacon, arguably the finest bacon produced in America, in a “stew” with cannellini beans. This little pot is reminiscent of cassoulet.

Spice-of-Life Pork Spare Ribs do not fare as well. Swenson is aiming for an Asian-style rib and winds up in limbo. With a dry rub containing cinnamon and cocoa and a sauce made with apples, tomatoes, and cider vinegar, nothing gels. The ribs, which are parboiled then grilled (the restaurant has no smoker), emerge rather tough as well.

A 14-ounce bone-in, double-rib pork chop is terrific. Glazed with bourbon and maple syrup, it is broiled to form a crust then finished in the oven. The inside is tender and moist. Do not order this well done, or it will be ruined. Pork has been safe to eat rare since 1963. Forget about what your mother said and order it rare to medium-rare. The chop comes with sweet potato fries. Tricky things these are; if they are not hot and crispy send them back for a remake. Tell Chris I said it was O.K.

The *cioppino* is almost great, but even the chef says it is inconsistent. Swimming in a bath of spicy tomato, garlic, and fish fumet are clams, New Zealand mussels (the big green ones), jumbo shrimp, and half a Maine lobster. Flavors are fantastic, but the shellfish are occasionally overcooked. This is most true and unfortunate concerning the lobster, which is the most delicate. When the *cioppino* is right, it is *the* four-star dish on the menu. Check with the chef before ordering. It costs \$39, so an error will be costly.

A *filet mignon*, eight ounces of certified Black Angus beef, comes with a rosemary-morel-mushroom cream sauce. The morels pack a punch like a right cross from the reigning heavyweight champ, and the subtle little *filet* has trouble standing up to it. Perhaps a New York steak would be better, but both the *filet* and the sauce are superb.

The lobster ravioli comes in with mixed reviews. The ravioli is actually stuffed with a five-cheese medley although ricotta is dominant. These are tossed with a tomato, veggie, white wine, and herbed-lemon broth with chunks of Nova Scotia lobster, but the lobster is overcooked.

Among the other offerings the Chilean sea bass, Colorado lamb chops, and 16-ounce rib steak are the best bets.

Dessert is miraculous. Forget the menu, what you want is the lemon cake with sour cream sorbet. I know it sounds weird, but trust me on this one. The cake is in two parts, a light-as-air cake with a lemon custard of sorts on the top. It turns out that this custard is actually created in the cooking process. The cake is a meringue-based poached dumpling. In the poaching process the heavier elements—the lemon juice, sugar, and egg yolks—sink to the bottom and form their own custard. When served, the “dumpling” is flipped so the custard is on the top. To this little wonder two little scoops of sour cream sorbet—sour cream, water, and sugar—churned in an ice cream machine, are added. The taste is like nothing expected. The whole is a tangy lemony air-bomb that dissolves on contact.

RITZ-CARLTON

68-900 Frank Sinatra Dr.

Rancho Mirage

Resort: ★★★★★½

As of this writing, the Ritz-Carlton is closed for a complete remodel. It was scheduled to reopen during the fall of 2008, but the economic recession put the entire project on hold. Situated on a panoramic plateau 650 feet above the Coachella Valley, the Ritz-Carlton offers the most spectacular location of any resort in the desert. Two Bunch Palms in Desert Hot Springs (reviewed later in this chapter) is its only competition in the view department. It does not have a golf course.

MARRIOTT'S DESERT SPRINGS RESORT AND SPA

74-855 Country Club Dr.

Palm Desert

Resort: ★★★★★

This is the Big Splash of the desert resorts: eight floors, 833 rooms.

This may well be the largest building in the Coachella Valley, with a 30,000-square-foot spa, two championship golf courses, 210,000 square feet of event space including a 25,000-square-foot ballroom, four swimming pools, time-share condos, boutique shopping, ample tennis including a grass court and a sport wall, and even a nightclub. This impressive structure—a 20th-century castle—sits on the crest of a hill encased by a moat. The lush landscaping extends for the better part of a square mile, but nothing prepares the visitor for his first glimpse of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon—the spectacular atrium-cum-lobby. Free water taxis pull into the lobby through automatic hanger-style doors to deliver guests to the restaurant of their choice.

Five restaurants of various types and prices are operated by the Springs, along with the Oasis poolside bar. All the major resorts have poolside bars with snacks, lunch, and bar service, but it has been my experience that these amenities are best avoided. The food quality ranges from bad to passable, and the cost is prohibitive.

Four of the five restaurants are not recommended. The Lakeview serves comfort food at a moderate price; the expensive Sea Grill, steaks, chops, and seafood. The costly Mikado serves Americanized Japanese cuisine. Colibri Grille does Mexican at a moderate price. Ristorante Tuscany is the high-end venue, and it makes a serious attempt at *alta cucina*. It should be better than it is considering its enormous cost.

Ristorante Tuscany

★½

\$\$\$\$

Location: 74-855 Country Club Dr., Palm Desert, 311-5828. **Food type:** northern Italian, *alta cucina*. **Ambiance:** formal and elegant, with hints of Vegas kitsch. **Bar:** full; extensive wine list. **Reservations:** suggested. **Hours:** dinner nightly.

The room elicits feelings of a Pompeian mansion, with clever trompe l'oeil murals creating vistas of Roman spender. The interior décor is elegant and expensive with hints of Las Vegas kitsch. The ambiance is formal but not stuffy. Tenor arias from “soft” Italian operas (Puccini and the like) wafting through the space are not going to suit everyone’s taste, but volume levels are kept in check. Tuscany serves only the finest seasonal ingredients,

and the quality of cooking ranks among the best in the valley. Service and presentation are excellent, but the recipes are frequently irrational. Counterpoint is wonderful in both music and food, but it must function as one. A fugue is not a bunch of tunes played at the same time. It is a single work. The harmony of opposites is just that, a harmony, not a dissonance. At Tuscany, the whole is often less than the sum of its parts.

A confit of Muscovy duck is shredded, sprinkled over tangy goat cheese, and served on a crusty honey bread. The duck is terrific—sweet, flavorful, and rich. But in what way is it a confit? A confit is duck, usually a leg, highly spiced and deep-fried in its own fat. This is simply roasted duck. The cheese is terrific, but it has nothing to do with the duck, succeeding only in smothering its taste. The bread, *farnia crosta*, is ample padding.

Lobster ravioli, with *sambuca rosa* sauce, roasted tomato, and Parmigiano-Reggiano, suffers from the same problem. The pairing of cheese and seafood is problematic as Parmigiano-Reggiano packs a powerhouse punch. The waiter offers the cheese; I had him grate some onto the side of my plate. Since the cheese is listed as part of the dish I felt I should at least taste it once that way. The lobster itself is very small but marvelous. The pasta is tough and chewy, as though made the day before. There is no excuse for this. Tuscan pasta, made of egg and flour kneaded, rolled, cut, and boiled, should be soft enough to dissolve in the mouth. The sauce, redolent of concentrated tomato, obliterated the lobster. I removed the bits of lobster and ate them separately. The cheese went onto everything else.

Again, the problem surfaces with succulent, full-flavored, and perfectly cooked Colorado double lamb chops. The dish is served with cannellini beans. This should be a winner, but these beans are light and slightly acidic (lemon? lime? white-wine vinegar?). They cannot stand up to the lamb and quickly became irrelevant. Some marriages are made in heaven, but the bride and groom should at least have something in common.

Spinach and roasted elephant garlic fare no better in the dish, bringing only an irrelevant bitterness. Roasted red peppers should have been an excellent addition, but these are not hearty in the Florentine manner, sautéed simply in olive oil. This lamb cries out for gutsy rusticity, and it gets delicacy—roasted, marinated, peeled, red pepper julienne. Italian cuisine meets California Nouvelle.

Tiramisu here is simply a version of cheesecake. The mascarpone cheese

in a tiramisu has to be whipped with egg yolks and folded with whipped cream and meringue like a mousse. This may be mediocre cheesecake, but it is a violation of the entire concept of tiramisu.

MIRAMONTE RESORT

45-000 Indian Wells Lane

Indian Wells

Resort: ★★★★★

From the street, the Miramonte appears rather unassuming, even dull. It has the look of a Renaissance or baroque Tuscan estate, but it is so close to Highway 111 that there is no room to appreciate its timeless beauty. Inside, however, it is gorgeous. Meticulously maintained gardens of roses and bougainvillea season the walkways through lush, vibrant green grass. Villas named after the regions of Italy grace the landscape. Set against the stark rocky grandeur of the Santa Rosas, this lushness, coupled with azure pools and Italian fountains, offers a feast of contrasts for the eye. This resort has recently undergone a \$6 million makeover. The air-conditioning system, which has been unreliable in the past, has been replaced.

There is a calm, a serenity, which pervades the environment. Thoughts meander to the luxury of ancient Rome. The Miramonte is not on the scale of its sister resorts across the street—Renaissance Esmeralda and Hyatt Grand Champions—but it achieves an intimacy and seclusion of which those two mega-resorts cannot even dream.

There is no house golf course, but the three courses at the Golf Resort at Indian Wells are adjacent, and Miramonte guests have priority there. Several package deals provide for a round of golf. The other usual resort amenities are present.

Grove Artisan Kitchen

★★★

\$\$-\$\$\$

Location: 45-000 Indian Wells Lane, Indian Wells, 341-2200. **Food type:** Italian/Mediterranean. **Ambiance:** rather ordinary interior; beautiful patio with views of lush grounds and mountains. **Bar:** full; adequate wine list. **Reservations:** suggested for dinner. **Hours:** breakfast, lunch, dinner; room and pool service daily; Sunday brunch. **Chef:** Robert Nyerick.

When cost and food quality are averaged, the Miramonte offers one of the better values in the desert. The BluEnder at Las Palmas Resort in Rancho Mirage, a similar style of resort, provides for a slightly better dining experience but at a higher cost.

The Miramonte's restaurant changed its name from Brissago and underwent extensive remodeling in 2009, but the advertised emphasis on fresh local and organic produce is mostly cosmetic. The menu is still mixed Mediterranean. That is to say, a variety of dishes are offered from the Mediterranean rim with the emphasis on Italy and Spain.

Lobster bisque with mascarpone cheese and chive oil may emphasize its tomato base at the expense of the lobster, but it is certainly full-flavored and satisfying. Seared sea scallops are just this side of perfect, garnished with an oven-dried tomato and baby frisée. The menu claims diver scallops, which they are not, but they are excellent nevertheless. The surface is caramelized, and the interior moist and rare. Carpaccio is Prime filet with caper berries and shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano. This is one instance where a lower grade of beef would work better. Prime filet mignon has so much marbling, the flavor of the meat is reduced. Choice or even Select filets are certainly not lacking in tenderness, and the corresponding increase in flavor would better serve this dish. A thin coating of Dijon mustard does not contribute either; its uncut flavor is too potent.

The Miramonte paella is superb. More of a Cuban paella than the traditional Valencia style, this one brings shrimp, scallops, mussels, and clams to a powerful saffron-infused Arborio rice. This creamy short-grain Italian rice, usually the foundation of risotto, is an excellent substitute for the more exotic Valencia rices. Flavors here are balanced, and none of the seafood is dried out or overcooked—something not easy to pull off. The addition of shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano is not exactly Spanish, but so what! At \$19 for lunch and \$26 for dinner, it is also a good value.

Chef Nyerick does thick slices of Kurobuta pork tenderloin Saltimboca with wilted organic baby spinach and a grilled polenta cake. This is another winner from the entrée list. The supremely tender and flavorful Kurobuta pork (ask for it rare or medium rare) is paired beautifully with the polenta and spinach. Again, at \$24 it is good buy.

A 12-ounce Black Angus New York steak (\$26) or an eight-ounce center cut filet mignon (\$28) that actually includes potatoes and winter

vegetables beats the overrated steakhouse prices by half.

Wild-mushroom risotto with truffle essence cannot be faulted, but the molten chocolate cake with fresh berries certainly can be. The berries, strawberry coulis, and molten chocolate are terrific, but the cake itself tastes strictly out of a box.

The new restaurant offers something quite fascinating and unique for this area—a honey lavender ice cream. Lavender is a decidedly savory herb, like thyme or basil. Its flavor profile is tart and acidic. Marrying this to ice cream is wildly unexpected. It is a bit startling at first, but is irresistible by the third taste.

Even the pool menu offers more quality than is usually offered at such venues, including a half-pound Angus burger with Gorgonzola, Greek salad, calamari, and a panini with grilled seasonal veggies.

MIRACLE SPRINGS RESORT AND SPA

10-625 Palm Dr.

Desert Hot Springs

Resort: ★★½

The resorts of the south valley are designed around golf; the resorts of Desert Hot Springs are designed around water—natural hot mineral water that bubbles up from the earth at 170 degrees. These resorts do not have golf, and tennis is minimal or nonexistent. With one exception—Two Bunch Palms—they do not have gourmet restaurants. For the most part these resorts are rather decrepit affairs, and food is most decidedly an afterthought. (There is a place called Doc's Diner located within the Agua Caliente Hotel, 14-500 Palm Dr. Avoid both it and the hotel like the plague.) With the exception of Two Bunch Palms, Miracle Springs is the nicest resort and the only one with tolerable food.

There are eight natural hot-water pools, massage, and various spa treatments. Guests are also treated to views not available from “the other side.” Desert Hot Springs sits at the foothills of Joshua Tree National Park. Its elevation is 1,100 feet above sea level. Across the valley, elevations are near zero, with below-sea-level numbers existing from Indio east to the Salton Sea. This elevation gives Miracle Springs a spectacular view across the desert floor as well as the snowcapped north face of Mount San Jacinto. For a review, see the section on Chuckwalla in Chapter 15.

RANCHO LAS PALMAS RESORT

41-000 Bob Hope Dr.

Rancho Mirage

Resort: ★★★★★

This is a resort for the person inclined toward a slower, less frenetic vacation. The hotel is older. With its Spanish architecture of high ceilings, extensive use of wood, and Saltillo and ceramic tile, there is an air of European old-world elegance not found in the newer resorts. Even the La Quinta Resort, built in 1926, does not share in this grandness as it is not really a hotel but a series of separated casitas.

Ironically, Las Palmas, built on 249 acres of lushly landscaped grounds, is located in central Rancho Mirage directly across the street from the trendy shopping venue known as The River and a few blocks from the Rodeo Drive of the desert, El Paseo. Rancho Las Palmas is within walking distance to scores of restaurants, theaters, and fancy shopping boutiques, yet it manages to maintain a quiet sense of isolation. Twenty-seven holes of golf and all the expected amenities are also hidden away in this low-profile resort.

Having recently shed its connection with Marriott and been acquired by the KSL Resorts Collection, the entire property is undergoing an extensive remodeling. This change is physical to be sure, but it is also centered in the very heart of the kitchen. Executive Chef Leanne Kamekona, with years of experience both as chef de cuisine and executive chef at the La Quinta Resort and Club, joined Las Palmas and was charged with the task of redesigning the menu from the ground up. The result is a startling improvement in Las Palmas's dining room. Sous chef under the great chef emeritus Sarah Bowman at the Miramonte, Todd Claytor has joined Kamekona at Las Palmas. The result is a marriage made in heaven

BluEmber

★★★★½

\$\$\$

Location: 41-000 Bob Hope Dr., Rancho Mirage, 568-2727. **Food type:** California Fusion (Southwestern). **Ambiance:** mansion on the Spanish Riviera. **Bar:** full; small but adequate wine list. **Reservations:** suggested.

Hours: lunch and dinner daily. **Chefs:** Leanne Kamekona (*executive*), Todd Claytor (*cuisine*).

The food at BluEmber under the capable and creative direction of the Kamekona/Claytor team is terrific. It is four-star quality, and the only reason I haven't given them four stars is because it lacks the originality and perfection of a Jimmy Schmidt at Rattlesnake (see Chapter 4) or Vince Cultraro or Livio Massignani at Morgan's (this chapter) and Sirocco, respectively (this chapter).

Chilled tomato and crab soup is served cold and presented as a relative of gazpacho, but it takes that venerable Spanish staple to a whole new place. Crab or lobster claws float gently in what appears to be a red-pepper bisque rather than a tomato-vegetable purée. When you first venture a taste of the bisque, the cold is a pleasant surprise. The flavor profile follows. This is decidedly *not* a vegetable purée, nor is it based on red bell pepper. This bisque boasts of fresh tomatoes, but there are other tantalizing lines of counterpoint—garlic certainly, but fennel and coriander are harder to discern. It is spiked with a little cayenne and a drizzle of chive oil. This is a superb soup; everything works together with the crustacean as focal point.

A roasted tomato and mozzarella tart doesn't look like something special on the menu. It doesn't say, for example, that the tart is a wonderfully sweet and light puff pastry. It doesn't say that the sweetness comes from caramelizing the tomatoes or reducing the 10-year-old balsamic vinegar by 70 percent. Nowhere does it say that the soft earthiness of the melted cheese, the light crunch of the pastry, and the acidic bite of the tomatoes are expertly foiled by the use of bitter micro greens.

Want a sandwich? Sandwiches are the foundation of almost every lunch menu in the valley. Tell you what: forget about all of them and ask for the El Cubano at Rancho Las Palmas. This is braised pork shoulder that has been shredded. It is unbelievably tender and full flavored. It is stacked onto a telera, a Spanish roll similar to a ciabatta. Paper thin slices of Black Forest ham are layered on top of Swiss cheese. When garnished with dill pickle and stone-ground mustard, this is an unusual sandwich that sandwich fans will immediately label as "to die for."

Chef Claytor cures Scottish salmon in Grand Marnier and brandy. The result is sweeter—because of the orange liqueur—and fatter—because

it is Scottish salmon—than the usual vodka-cured gravlax. With frisée, thick slices of tart Granny Smith apple, juniper berries, and fennel, another masterful appetizer is created.

Both the grilled swordfish salad and the shellfish pasta are superb choices, but it is the Kurobuta pork that garners the greatest accolades. I can say without risk of being proved wrong that this pork entrée is the finest in all the valley. It begins with Kurobuta pork, developed in Japan from the Black Berkshire hog as a companion to Kobe beef. The Black Berkshire is bred for a very high fat content in the manner of beef, and the meat is marbled like Prime steak. Kurobuta pork is also red, not white, and should be eaten medium rare. It is available at Jensen's grocery for \$15 a pound. Expensive? Yes, but it is so rich that eight ounces is plenty for a normal appetite. In a magazine column I wrote in 2003, I explained the purpose and use of this amazing pork. At that time, no restaurant in the desert was serving it. It has slowly moved into a couple of them, but this is its best use. It is a large rib chop weighing approximately 10 ounces. The meat is everything you always dreamed of in a pork chop: tender as filet mignon, flavorful as a slab of shoulder. The chop is covered with ground cumin and coriander seed, seared, and finished in the oven. A risotto flavored with poblano chilies, shallots, garlic, and cayenne—to bump the heat without interfering with the flavor—is made with cream and white wine instead of the traditional chicken stock. The result is a big creamy risotto equal to the task of accompanying the pork, its Southwestern flavors perfectly compatible with the cumin and coriander on the meat. Roasted asparagus, a notoriously difficult partner, has no trouble sliding right into this context. With appropriate attention to detail, these stringy stems are nicely peeled.

One new menu item that must be noted is the pork shank in puttanesca sauce. This is hugely satisfying. It is both physically big (the pig's ankle bone being larger than that of the lamb), but big in the flavor department as well. The puttanesca sauce is a little disconcerting at first. One doesn't expect olives, anchovies, and capers with a shank bone, but it certainly isn't bad.

This is a terrific restaurant in a terrific space. Dine in the atrium or outside on the magnificent new patio off the pool. Except for the lack of the Mediterranean Sea, this could be the hills of Barcelona or the Amalfi Coast.

THE RENAISSANCE ESMERALDA

44-400 Indian Wells Lane

Indian Wells

Resort: ★★★★★

This is one of three resort destinations tucked away in the wealthy little enclave of Indian Wells. With a population of less than 4,000 people and a median family income of \$134,237, Indian Wells is the wealthiest city in Riverside County and in the 98th percentile in the nation. Not as splashy as Marriott's Desert Springs, the Esmeralda pursues a lower profile though it is no less elegant.

Architecture is 1980s-style postmodern: pink, turquoise, and overly ornate. It does, however, get the job done gracefully and efficiently, and the grand staircase, although stylistically at odds with the general theme, is gorgeous. Sirocco, serving *alta cucina*, is a four-star restaurant. Chef Livio Massignani, with credentials a mile long, is a genius in the kitchen.

Sirocco

★★★★★

\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Location: 44-400 Indian Wells Lane, Indian Wells, 773-4666. **Food type:** northern Italian, *alta cucina*. **Ambiance:** formal and elegant; view of fountains, lake, and golf course. **Bar:** full; excellent wine list. **Reservations:** suggested. **Hours:** dinner nightly. **Chef:** Livio Massignani. **Note:** If Massignani is not present, quality is inconsistent.

“Everything in life—whether you are a tenor, pianist, race car driver, or chef—is a gift from God, a manifestation of his will. We must make ourselves fluent in order to bring these gifts to life in the best possible way. I am compelled to give the best possible food to my customers. I work within a tradition of culinary greatness that dates back to the eleventh century.”—Livio Massignani

A sirocco is a hot and muscular wind that blows across the Mediterranean into Italy from the Sahara. Sirocco is also the name of a marvelous restaurant in another desert. At its helm is Livio Massignani. This is not a good restaurant where, if you order carefully, you may well have a fine meal. Sirocco is a great restaurant. You may order whatever

you like from a substantial and creative menu with complete confidence. Massignani serves only the finest quality ingredients, prepared with enormous skill and artistry.

Venetian born, Chef Massignani is broadly and deeply educated, speaking four languages and having extensive knowledge of economics and the fine arts. A graduate of the prestigious Instituto Rossi di Vicenza, he has served as chef to kings as well as some of the finest hotels and restaurants in the world.

With 120-degree views—lake, golf course, fountains—Sirocco also offers a beautiful dining environment. Italian opera, played at an unobtrusive level, manages to sway your soul in the direction of the fifth muse.

House-made rosemary bread sticks, a sun-dried tomato butter, and peppery Tuscan olive oil are delivered to your table. Massignani himself serves an *amuse bouche*, or an amusement for the mouth—a raviolo made with beet pasta, stuffed with spinach and ricotta cheese, and immersed in a sauce of heavy cream sprinkled with shaved four-year-old Parmigiano-Reggiano. The intensity of the cheese merges with the subtlety of the beets and spinach and conspires with the cream. How can something this “simple” be this good?

Reading the menu is addictive. This is not a menu designed by poll takers or focus groups; this is the creative passion of a master chef, a genuine artist. *Vellutata d’Aragosta* (lobster bisque) breaks all taste barriers. The word is flavor—huge, gigantic, all-encompassing mountains of flavor saturating the taste buds. Massignani, if time allows, visits with his customers. “Reduction, reduction, reduction,” he says. The cream does not go in until the very end. Chardonnay, brandy, tomato, a mirepoix, oregano, parsley, basil, and lobster (including all the shells and coral) are simmered forever and reduced by more than 75 percent. Then the cream is added, and it is reduced again. The final product is strained and fresh pieces of lobster and shrimp are added. Truly, an amazing bisque!

Melanzane grigliate con caprino caldo (eggplant grilled and topped with caramelized onions and served with pan-seared goat cheese) is an unlikely combination of tastes. First the eggplant is salted to leach out liquid. This intensifies the flavor. It is then grilled. The onions, which are now sweet and soft, bring a different texture and flavor to the party. Goat cheese offers a creamy pungency. A trio of diverse flavors and textures, all of which complement and foil one another, is born.

If Livio Massignani has a first love, it is the mushroom. He is a vast

library of knowledge concerning the miraculous fungi, and wherever practical, they make their way into his cooking. The magnificent porcini is packed into his wild mushroom risotto. This big, soft, earthy mushroom is simmered with Arborio rice, herbs, chicken stock, white wine, and more Parmigiano-Reggiano until it gives birth to a dense, powerfully flavored risotto. Finally, it is anointed with truffle oil.

Lombatina di vitello Valdostana (stuffed veal chop) is dry-aged for 58 days—compared with 35 days at the best of the Prime steakhouses—which gives it a nutty taste and renders it unbelievably tender. It is stuffed with prosciutto di Parma and Fontina Val d’Aosta cheese. Consider the supertender, slightly perfumed baby calf rib with a pocket of potent “ham” and “cheese.” But wait! The sauce! The sauce is actually a fondue rather than a sauce. Imagine this: a prime stuffed double-thick veal chop resting in a thick liquid. You taste the liquid. This is not meat-stock reduction. In its stead is a reduction of Prosecco (Italian sparkling wine), cream, melted Parmigiano-Reggiano, and morels. Along with chanterelles and porcini, morels are among the world’s best wild mushrooms.

Sirocco is a “must go” restaurant, even if only for special occasions. Entrée prices are high—an average of \$35—but the appetizers, soups, salads, and desserts are all lower than those of comparable quality around town. The wine list, too, has a substantial number of bottles in the \$30 range. Entrées are large and eminently splittable.

RIVIERA RESORT AND SPA

1600 N. Indian Canyon Dr.

Palm Springs

Resort: ★★★

Built in 1958, this is the only standing resort of the golden age of Palm Springs. The Riviera has been substantially rebuilt, refurbished, updated, and upgraded, and the phantasmagoria of Frank, Dean, Sammy, and even Elvis, once deeply embedded in the pores of the building—especially the showroom—are gone. In fact, even the showroom is gone. In their stead is a stunningly beautiful new main building all done in a luscious charcoal gray (with a most subtle brown back note), a brilliant red orange, and the neutrals of natural woods and stone. This is a 1950s-style desert resort built when land was cheap. It is spread out with wings of two-story

bungalows extending from a central core. Here the rebuilding is not as complete. Many of these distant wings still show their age. However, the architecture elicits feelings of nostalgia for those of a certain age, which is hardly a bad thing. This is not a negative nostalgia by any means.

Amenities are thin by contemporary standards: two pools and Jacuzzi spa. There are three golf courses within a 10-minute drive, but none on premises. Size is the limiting factor. Many of the big resorts have many times the acreage of the Riviera.

A new restaurant with the amusing appellation Circa '59 is part of the new Riviera.

Circa '59

★★

\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Location: 1600 N. Indian Canyon Dr., Palm Springs. **Food type:** American. **Ambiance:** Several beautiful rooms, indoor/outdoor cabana-style rooms, and large outdoor patio, all with views of the clover-shaped pool. **Reservations:** suggested. **Hours:** breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily.

Like its neighbor down the street, Purple Plum, annoying music is piped aggressively throughout both the adjacent pool area and outdoor dining patio of Circa '59. For a full description of those sounds see Purple Plum at the Colony Palms Hotel in Chapter 2.

When is service too good? When it is fawning. My flatware was changed three times before my entrée even arrived. Every time I touched my knife or fork, somebody switched it for a new one. The moment I took a sip of water, somebody was there to refill the glass. Even my napkin was changed once I unfolded it. Throughout my dinner I must have been asked 20 times if everything was all right and/or did I want anything, and not just by my server, but by the maitre d' and bus staff as well.

It is common practice for me to request that the chef choose my order, usually from two or three menu options. With a chef I know and love, I often tell him to just feed me. Pelech at Chez Pierre (see Chapter 5), for example, falls into this category. At Circa '59 the waiter decides. Isn't that nice? Saves so much time.

The *amuse bouche* is a little tiny cup of lobster bisque "with cognac foam." It has a huge lobster flavor. The intensity of the lobster ranks right

up there with the master, Livio Massignani at Sirocco (this chapter). It is, however, laced with so much heavy cream that it becomes cloying. The menu says “light cream,” which is an oxymoron. The term “light” is used but it may not mean what you think it means. Whole milk is 4 percent butterfat. Half-and-half ranges up to 18 percent; “light” cream, up to 30 percent; whipping cream, up to 36 percent; heavy cream, to 40 percent; and manufacturer’s cream is anything over 40 percent. Butter is 90 percent. So even if the chef is using “light” cream, we are still talking about a liquid that is almost one-third butter fat. After the second spoonful the soup is so rich it coats the mouth with an unpleasant greasiness. By contrast Livio Massignani at Sirocco reduces his lobster stock base until it becomes thick by evaporation. Cognac foam? Oh, that must be that little white line across the top.

The crab cake is advertised as coming with “lemongrass lobster sauce and tomato jam.” The “lemongrass lobster sauce” is the lobster bisque! What lemongrass? The crab cake is mostly crab; in other words, it is not really a crab “cake.” There is very little binder, which generally comes in the form of mayonnaise. Mustard, Old Bay seasoning, parsley, onion, maybe some bell pepper—none of these traditional crab cake ingredients has a presence. Nor is it coated with crumbs and fried. In other words, it is not really a crab cake in any traditional sense of the word. The flavor of the crab is also overwhelmed by the intense lobster bisque, and the butterfat content is off the charts. To further complicate matters there is the overpoweringly sweet tomato jam. Cris Swensen at Twenty6 (Chapter 15) does a tomato jam that functions as a foil between Humboldt Fog goat cheese and an omelet. His is moderately sweet and flavored with cardamom and shallots. This one could substitute for any red jam slathered on a peanut butter sandwich. There is no acidity here to break up the already sweet bisque and crab. The jam doesn’t work at all.

One of my rules for dining out is never to order chicken. The rule was ironclad until I ordered it here. Why am I breaking it now? Two reasons: I think I should order it once in a while—chicken, after all, is one of a restaurant’s staples—and this one also looks particularly interesting. The hype reads, “Organic Chicken sea salt roasted, wild mushrooms, midnight tomatoes, goat cheese dumplings, Madeira cream.” Interesting that the menu puts the “sea salt roasted” after the organic chicken. It makes more sense to write “sea-salt-roasted organic chicken,” but I suppose they

wanted the primary ingredient listed first. It makes no difference whether this chicken is roasted in a hardened block of salt or not. There is no taste residue either way. This cooking technique is generally used for prime rib, where it creates a controlled, even cooking temperature all around the meat. A thigh and half a breast arrive. The plate is attractive. The skin is wonderfully crisp. The thigh meat is cooked well but is as uninteresting as a chicken thigh can possibly be. The breast is overcooked and dried out.

The Madeira cream sauce with wild mushrooms is once again loaded up with cream. While adding clarified butter, cream, or bits of cold butter to a sauce is standard practice in classical French cooking, it works best when the meat for which the sauce is intended is particularly lean. Venison and rabbit come to mind. The “wild” mushrooms are shitake. Shitake mushrooms have been cultivated since 1940, so they really can't be called “wild” any more. This aside, they do work well with both the Madeira base and the chicken meat.

“Goat cheese dumplings” is one dumpling-shaped piece of mashed potato. (I know my grammar is mixing up singular and plural, but that's what happens when a menu says “dumplings” and you get only one.) Anyway, the thing on my plate is not a dumpling (in the dim sum sense or the gnocchi sense, where a piece of dough is filled with something then boiled.) This is a batch of mashed potatoes mixed with some goat cheese. Two tablespoons were used to form a quenelle shape, which was then baked or pan-fried. As mashed potatoes, it tastes fine. As a goat cheese dumpling, it is a huge disappointment.

Midnight tomatoes? I have no idea what that means. There is a slice of fried tomato on my plate.

At an adjacent table this dish is left half-eaten. I did not eat the breast.

Dessert is Circa '59's take on the banana split. This is clever and successful. Half a banana is coated with sugar, which is then burned in the manner of a *crème brûlée*. The sweet/bitter flavors work nicely with the banana. An *éclair* is split open and filled with three little scoops of ice cream in the classic flavors. The whole thing is drizzled with chocolate. The best thing about it is the fact that it is not some enormous sickeningly sweet concoction fit only for the rapacious appetite of a teenage boy.

There is a peculiar arbitrary quality to this restaurant. The menu is terribly safe: something for everyone, nothing to offend, but nothing to inspire either. At the same time, classic recipes and sauces are changed

for no apparent reason. What, for example, is a jalapeño pesto? Is it an Italian pesto—basil, garlic, pine nuts, olive oil, and Parmesan—with a jalapeño chili added? This is completely incompatible with the other ingredients. Perhaps it is a bunch of jalapeño peppers substituting for the basil. This will render a blistering hot condiment only a Thai or Indian could appreciate. This “pesto” is served atop the wild salmon. A woman at an adjacent table took one bite and pushed it aside.

Purple Plum (Chapter 2) at Colony Palms Hotel is just up the street. Have a pleasant walk.

TWO BUNCH PALMS RESORT AND SPA

67-425 Two Bunch Palms Trail

Desert Hot Springs

Resort: ★ or ★★★★★, depending on your perspective

Visit Two Bunch Palms for a true schizoid experience. Independent Web sites call Two Bunch Palms a three-star hotel. After all, three is the average on a five-star scale. People either adore it or detest it. There is no golf, minimal tennis, and one restaurant. The emphasis here is on tranquility, a stunningly beautiful environment, and spa treatments—no fewer than 52 of them. No one under 18 is allowed. There is a hot springs grotto, several areas set aside for nude sunbathing, and a yoga pavilion.

Fans call the rooms “shabby chic”; detractors call them dreadful. Prices are off the charts—a low of \$185 to a high of \$675 per night! This does not include a single spa treatment. On the favorable side, the readers of both *Travel & Leisure* and *Condé Nast Traveler* magazines rate Two Bunch Palms as one of their “top 10 favorite spas in the United States and the world.”

This is a secret place—difficult to find and heavily guarded—into which one does not walk off the street. Even the name of the resort is not posted out front. Entry is past a stone guardhouse. Reservations are mandatory. There are no exceptions. Huge tamarisk trees, radically bent by six decades of high winds, grow up and out of every available space. A meandering stream, several lakes, and a yoga pavilion are things not found at your local Hyatt. With only 44 rooms, casitas, suites, and villas on a property of about 250 acres, this resort is more about space, solitude, and Zen-like relaxation than it is about fun in the sun. It is an uncomfortable mixture of health farm, 1970s-style commune, and hedonistic hideaway.

Desert Hot Springs offers virtually no shopping or fine-dining options. Unless Two Bunch Palms guests are willing to commute the 15-odd miles to downtown Palm Springs, they are truly isolated.

Rumors abound that Two Bunch Palms was originally built by Al Capone as a getaway for himself and his gang. Whether true or not is irrelevant. The restaurant is called The Casino, which is what it allegedly was when Capone was in charge. Capone's house still stands, and girlfriend Gladys Walton's car, a bulletproof 1929 Duesenberg, is parked in front of the office.

Casino Dining Room

★★★

\$\$\$

Location: 67-425 Two Bunch Palms Trail, Desert Hot Springs, 329-8791. **Food type:** California Fusion. **Ambiance:** seems to have been designed by a relaxation therapist. **Bar:** full, but wine is the drink of choice. **Reservations:** mandatory if not staying at the resort. **Hours:** breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily. **Chef:** Michael Hutcheons.

The dining room is almost round, with a wall of glass facing the San Jacinto Mountains to the south and west. The veranda is perfectly situated to toast the sun as it gradually withdraws behind 10,000-foot snow-capped peaks. The crackling fireplace surrounded by deep-pile love seats and armchairs is often the only sound heard in the dining room. Silence is mandatory; signs saying so are everywhere. The owner of a ringing cell phone is subject to flagellation. A nice touch, though not exactly consistent with the overall tone, is the presence of several original Hurrell-signed photographs of the luminaries of Hollywood's golden age.

The food ranges from astonishingly good to oddly inconsistent. Crab cakes, seared on the surface, tender and moist on the inside, are dressed in a lime cream sauce. Unusually and successfully made with pimentos and sweet onion—easy on the filler, thank you—and garnished with fresh corn, the whole package is quite delightful. The lime-cream reduction (without a starchy thickening) is especially welcome as a change from so many complex and often heavy sauces.

Scallops crusted with sweet macadamia nuts do not fare as well. The nuts, in a syrupy base, are so sweet that the natural sweetness of the scallops is lost

in a sucrose fog. The reason scallops do so well with Asian treatments is that the use of citrus, soy, or rice vinegar provides an opposite or complementary taste rather than an analogous one. To make matters worse, Chef Hutcheons garnishes with a mound of couscous and yellow tomato coulis. Couscous adds nothing except an additional texture to no purpose, and the tomato flavor is too intense to provide an acidic balance. The scallop, the primary ingredient, is lost in a blizzard of flavors.

Three double-rib lamb chops—called a rack on the menu—are cut from the rack and completely trimmed. Grilled hot and served rare, these are exquisite. There are both advantages and disadvantages to serving a “rack” like this. The downside is that the core of the meat cannot be cooked to a uniform state. This is why many people prefer prime rib to a rib steak. They want that uniform level of doneness. The upside is what makes a rib steak the choice of many over prime rib. They like the caramelized surface and the rare interior. The fact is that both can be excellent, but these are more correctly called double rib chops rather than a rack. The meat here is butter tender, wonderfully flavored, and the seared surface in no way detracts from the rare interior. With a simple pan juice reduction and a half-head of baked garlic, this is a most welcome treatment. It seems that half the chefs in town are trying to outdo each other with increasingly complex toppings, rubs, sauces, and fruit compotes for the ever-popular rack of lamb.

Again, Hutcheons shows a measure of insensitivity by serving, thankfully on the side, a cold and very sweet Dijon mustard sauce. Dijon mustard is a classic with lamb, but the degree of sweetness here smothers the subtlety of the meat. Simple garden vegetables garnish: red potatoes (slightly undercooked), Italian yellow squash, broccoli, and a carrot.

Redemption arrives with a superb sauce for the half duck. The various fig concoctions appearing at a number of upscale establishments are interesting, and often satisfying, but this one is a gem combining two successful traditions. Several restaurants are using Chinese plum-ginger sauce as a base for their duck sauces. Johannes Bacher at Johannes (see Chapter 7) adds honey, Chinese chili paste, mirin, and star anise. At Casino, Chef Hutcheons begins with hoisin sauce—that other famous Chinese duck accompaniment—and combines it with orange and port reductions. This is at once sweet, sour, bitter, and acidic, providing the tongue with all the taste elements. Tremendous depth comes from the port wine.

Desserts are strictly routine: *crème brûlée*, berries, sorbet, and chocolate cake.

Considering the cost of a stay at Two Bunch Palms, one is pleasantly surprised that the cost of dining there is reasonable (relatively speaking). All the dinner entrées are between \$18 and \$30, with the majority at \$26. The markups on the wine are acceptable. Bottles range from a low of \$22 to a high of \$110. A moderate corkage fee of \$15 is printed in large letters on both sides of the menu. This means the practice of bringing your own wine is encouraged.

A superb dinner for two could easily be had for under a C-note, all inclusive with sensitive ordering. Order the scallops, a salad, and the duck, bring your own wine, and share everything. Total cost including tax and 15 percent tip? About \$80.

WESTIN MISSION HILLS RESORT AND SPA

Dinah Shore and Bob Hope Dr.

Rancho Mirage

Resort: ★★★★★

The Westin was built in the mid-1980s, but it assaults the senses like a medieval Moorish fortress in Spain. With massive arches, Doric columns, and the look and feel of stone, it doesn't matter that this is really a postmodern building. Actually, to be more exact, postmodernism has a self-consciousness that is not present here. There is no parody or ironic commentary as there is at the Renaissance Esmeralda or the Spotlight 29 Casino. With its uniform deep burnished red color, the effect is imposing rather than friendly. But soon the mind adjusts and begins to appreciate its compelling beauty.

The Westin is spread out. Its "rooms" are a series of two-story quadruplexes. Architectural integrity is maintained throughout. There is little splash and flash, favoring a sense of privacy and quiet. The two golf courses are gorgeous and provide stunning views of both the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto mountain ranges. Three pools (the largest with an impressive water slide), tennis, basketball, soccer, biking, and spa services round out the amenities.

The restaurant, Bella Vista, has come up with a new name for its generic fine-dining menu. It is called (ready?) Euro-Cali.

Bella Vista

★★

\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

Location: Dinah Shore and Bob Hope Dr., Rancho Mirage, 770-2150. **Food type:** Euro-Cali (in reality, California with Italian influence). **Ambiance:** infinite golf-course views, fountains. **Bar:** full; mediocre wine list. **Reservations:** suggested for dinner. **Hours:** breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily.

The Bella Vista name is certainly accurate. The décor is blond wood with blue linens. The southerly view from the patio is wonderful. Golf courses extend into the mist of the Santa Rosa Mountains. The noise of the fountains is a little disconcerting but certainly not offensive. Unfortunately, the food does not live up to the splendid environment. A watery martini set the tone. The tab for this liquid libation? \$11.50. It was made from Bombay Sapphire but *please!*

The menu isn't bad; it's just safe. Oven-baked lobster pot as a first course seemed to offer at least a bit of creativity. Advertised as lobster with truffled mascarpone with penne, tomato, and parsley, it appeared to be one of the more interesting offerings. The "lobster pot" is a pasta pot with a few tiny pieces of lobster. This is not to say that it is not good. It is, but it is a huge disappointment. Minimal truffle oil is present but dissipates after the first bite. The mascarpone all but obliterates what lobster flavor exists. The creamy cheese and layers of flavor produce a pasta dish that is both satisfying and flavorful but decidedly not that which is advertised.

Entrées are divided into two groups, pizzas and entrées. In the latter category, nine dishes cling desperately to the safe: steak, chicken breast, halibut, veal, pasta, salmon, and roasted tofu (for the health conscious). Side dishes of Yukon mashers, cauliflower mashers, and a lox risotto comprise the list. There is nothing here to excite an adventurous taste bud.

Pizzas are more interesting. From the classic Margherita to a squash, mozzarella, garlic, Gorgonzola, mint, and parsley concoction, this sextuplet of Italian pies proves to be the menu's best feature. A pizza made with a spicy lamb sausage, portobello mushrooms, grilled zucchini, and goat cheese is probably the most interesting. The sausage has a perfect kick redolent of anise and chili flakes but also packed with flavor. Think of hot-sweet Italian sausage made with lamb instead of pork. Zucchini

brings the crunch factor usually supplied by green bell peppers, and portobello mushrooms deliver a soft earthiness not found in the standard white button mushroom. These three toppings on a bed of melted mozzarella form the basis of a truly fine pizza. The goat cheese manages to interfere with everything except the sausage. Its soft texture and tangy acidic flavor work in opposition to the basic idea of a cheese pizza. The hot melted mozzarella is so different from the cold soft goat cheese that they damage the flavors of each other.

As a whole, Bella Vista has some merit. It is certainly overpriced, and the menu is dull. But the basic quality, both of food and preparation, is there, and the service is excellent.