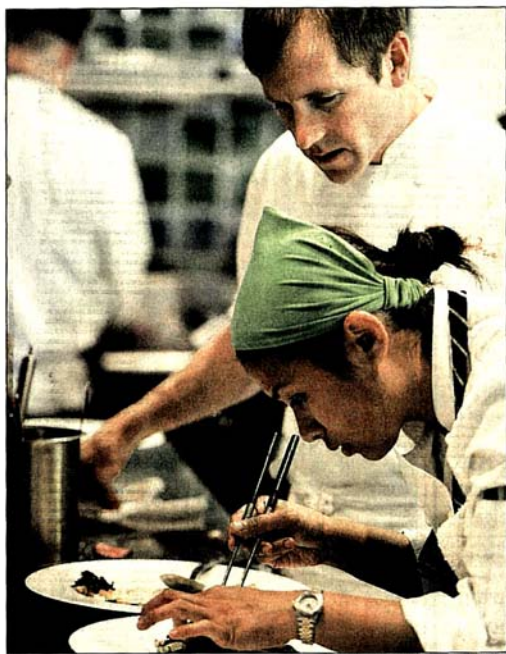


San Jose Mercury News

RESTAURANT REVIEW



KAREN T. BORCHERS/MERCURY NEWS
Executive Chef Peter Rudolph coordinates an entree with Anna Bautista at Madera restaurant in Menlo Park.

Madera puts diners in vacation mode

With few exceptions, Menlo Park restaurant matches its setting

By Jennifer Graue
Correspondent

The air feels somehow lighter, the sun a bit brighter, and time — which seemed so earnestly important as you made your way to Madera — no longer matters as the minutes melt into hours.

When you turn onto Sand Hill Road in Menlo Park, switch off the GPS, and enjoy a few blissful moments of not being told where to go. If it's on, it may insist — as mine did — on taking you to the parking lot of an insurance company on the wrong side of the road. Instead, slow down, and look for the Rosewood Hotel sign.

Madera is at the front of this 16-acre, resort-like property, which is what gives the restaurant its relaxed feel. Everything about it — from the wait staff in their white and khaki resort-casual attire to the linen place

mats and napkins — makes you feel as though you're on a luxury mini-vacation.

For better or worse, the atmosphere at Madera tends to upstage Chef Peter Rudolph's menu. That's not to say the food, which is primarily seasonal and as local as possible, isn't

good. It is. But there are the occasional miscues that, if corrected, would make every dish worthy of the opulent surroundings.

The bread basket is irresistible, particularly the soft herb focaccia and the flaky, butter pastry

pinwheels swirled with pesto, both made in house. They can be a bit oily, but that's easy to overlook when they taste so divine.

Madera's lunch menu is a mix of casual and more formal options. There are plenty of sandwiches and salads

MADERA

2825 Sand Hill Road,
Menlo Park
650-561-1540.

www.maderasandhill.com

★★ 1/2



From left, Madera Restaurant assistant manager Tahira Ali, chef de cuisine Anna Bautista and executive chef Peter Rudolph.

Madera

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— many substantial enough for a meal — along with more traditional main courses.

Rabbit rilette (\$11), a dish similar to pâté, served with an olive and fig compote and crostini, was a grand start to a long lunch. The sweet and salty compote provided the perfect foil to the unctuous pot of meat.

A salad of beets, blood oranges and Belgian endive (\$11) came alive with a dollop of soft cheese studded with bits of radish and capers.

My resident fish-and-chips expert was only mildly impressed with the Guinness battered cod (\$21). The generous fillets were flaky and moist inside, but the batter was a little gummy in places, not as crisp as it should be. The chips were fairly standard: thin-cut potatoes with the skins still on. The dish was served warm — not hot, but a fair lot better than the fries that came with the meatloaf sandwich (\$16).

Although the ones with the sandwich were from the same batch, the kitchen was scraping the bottom of the french fry barrel, or tray. The serving consisted almost entirely of nubbins, save for a half-dozen fries that were more than an inch long.

Disappointing, yes, but it allowed me to focus attention on the meatloaf. Made with veal and pork, it was dense, moist and exceedingly good. Topped with a fried egg and tangy

barbecue sauce, it had the potential to be a contender for best meatloaf sandwich, were it not for the bread. Considering the triumph of the bread basket, the fact that this was served on two toasted slices of rather ordinary bread that were far bigger than the slice of meatloaf was another disappointment. I couldn't help but wonder how much better the sandwich would be on ciabatta, for instance.

But back to that resort atmosphere: The light and airy dining room has the feel of a modern lodge with its high, vaulted ceiling and a fireplace along one wall. A large, open kitchen occupies one corner, opposite a wall of windows that look out onto the patio and beyond to the rolling, tree-covered Santa Cruz Mountains.

The dining room is pleasant enough, although the cushioned seats are a tad low for the tables, and the linens covering the chairs look as though they need to be freshened up. Where you really want to sit, especially if you're at Madera for lunch on a sun-drenched afternoon, is on the shaded patio, preferably next to the rail that overlooks the pool below.

Your mind will immediately slip into holiday mode as you watch sunbathers while a swimmer glides through the pool's crystal water with smooth, languid strokes. You'll be so entranced that you won't notice that it takes longer than usual for the busy yet unharried and refreshingly pleasant waiter to take your drink order.

Madera's wine list is extensive and spans the globe. At lunch, you'll likely be presented with the by-the-glass menu, but if you want the full list, ask for it. A sunny day on the patio calls for a crisp white or chilled rosé, or perhaps a cocktail like the rose geranium mojito (\$12).

Sip. Sigh contentedly. Repeat.

The evening meal we tried was more consistent than our lunch. Grilled asparagus salad with marinated shiitake mushrooms (\$12) had the added intrigue of a smoky flavor, although I could never find evidence of smoked salt, my prime suspect, on the plate.

Two cuts of roasted lamb loin (\$26), perfectly pink in the middle, were accompanied by an added surprise: a fragrant and delicious lamb meatball. It was wonderful to see fava greens, a much underutilized spring ingredient, adding their unique flavor to the dish.

Madera pointedly offers vegetarian options. Two very large artichoke and ricotta ravioli, topped with peas, fava beans and served on carrot puree (\$26), were quite satisfying, even for a committed carnivore looking for a lighter

option.

Sommelier Paul Mekis' visit to our table was brief but helpful. He was summoned to help choose a glass of wine to pair with the ravioli, once I'd narrowed it to two options. His recommendation for the Scarbolo Pinot Grigio (\$12) was unequivocal. His confidence was so reassuring I would probably drink Boone's Farm if he told me to.

For dessert, it would be hard to go wrong with the barely sweet Earl Grey chocolate soufflé (\$12), served in a chocolate tart cup, although the buttery raspberry and almond buckle served with buttermilk sorbet (\$10) was as good if not better. I was sad to find it missing from the menu on my second visit.

Madera tends to be a little pricier than similar restaurants, especially for main courses, but it helps to keep in mind you're paying for location and atmosphere. There's a chance you won't even notice as you watch the sun dip below the ridgeline of the mountains and daylight disappear. On the stroll to your car, you might wonder where the time went. Of course, that always happens when you're on vacation, even if it is only a short escape.

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★ ★ ½

The Dish: It's easy for locals to overlook fine-dining destinations at hotels, but Madera at the Rosewood Sand Hill is worth a visit. A meal here — especially a long lunch on the patio — can feel like a mini-vacation.

Prices: Starters and salads: \$9-\$30; Main courses: \$16-\$26 (lunch), \$24-\$36 (dinner); dessert \$10-\$12; wine by the glass \$9-\$40, by the bottle \$35 and up.

Details: Chef Peter Rudolph's menu has a fresh, seasonal local focus, with mostly excellent results. Minor stumbles on the lunch menu keep some dishes from being as good as they should be.

Pluses: The atmosphere and views from the patio are unbeatable. Servers are friendly and helpful. Sommelier Paul Mekis has assembled a wine list with excellent variety, including a diverse list of by-the-glass selections.

Minuses: Main courses are more expensive than at comparable restaurants; some lunch menu items need to be tweaked to bring them up to the quality of other dishes.

Hours: Lunch Monday-Saturday, 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; dinner Monday-Sunday, 5:30-9 p.m.; brunch Sunday only, 10:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.