

# SBLS

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# DOLCE LA VITA

*CARUSO'S AT ROSEWOOD MIRAMAR BEACH IS AN  
EXQUISITE JOURNEY INTO MICHELIN STARDOM  
HELMED BY ROMAN-BORN CHEF MASSIMO FALSINI*



I GREW UP IN TRASTEVERE,  
YOU SHOULD TRY THIS CARBONARA

Along the Santa Barbara coast, nestled atop a pristine stretch of sand where blue-and-white striped umbrellas dot the shore, lies a place where caviar exists as a mere accessory to bread and butter, and off-the-market champagne flows freely. Where menus are prix-fixe only, and celebrity sightings are yesterday's news; where handsome decor and even more handsomely slicked-back waiters pace, eager to refresh your wine glass. This exquisite beachfront scene is something out of a Fitzgerald novel, perhaps the inspiration for Gatsby's mansion, or, where the author himself might have nursed old fashioned and bolstered his imagination, should it be a century earlier. In my mind, Caruso's at Rosewood Miramar Beach has always been the lavish and fabled summit of Santa Barbara's already-impressive array of culinary establishments. One Sunday evening, I finally have the chance to experience the sensory journey at 1759 South Jameson Lane for myself.

As I sit with a girlfriend, sipping a flute of Delavenne champagne that's exclusive to the property, my heart beats with tantalizing anticipation of what the evening holds. Just the walk to Caruso's felt luxurious, my heels tapping against the Miramar's polished floors while absorbing the regal Hamptons-house atmosphere. Considering this is the only restaurant in Santa Barbara county to hold not only a Michelin Star, but also a rarified Michelin *Green Star* (one of only 426 globally), I'll admit I have lofty expectations. Soft jazz accompanies the clink of crystal glasses, and in front of us, a masthead billows in the wind and gentle waves lap the deck just steps away, as if we're on a yacht sailing the Pacific.

Caruso's, named after Miramar's owner and billionaire developer Rick Caruso, is nothing short of what you'd expect from a Michelin-starred restaurant. Exquisite gold leaf-dusted desserts, white asparagus imported from France, cases of Brunello di Montalcino, and tins of caviar are all abundantly present. It's timeless and unabashedly elegant, one of few Santa Barbara establishments where a smart, buttoned-up atmosphere and a dress code of "casual elegance," meaning no sportswear, hats, or flip flops, is still enforced. This, along with the nautical atmosphere, evokes an old-school charm reminiscent of the 60s—yet, Caruso's is propelled into the future through the reinventive cuisine and revered talent of Director of Culinary Operations, better known as Chef,



WELCOME BITES



Massimo Falsini. At the forefront of Caruso's epicurean philosophy is showcasing the locally harvested, sustainably-sourced bounty of Santa Barbara's coast, reinvented with Italian panache—though, calling Caruso's an Italian restaurant would be a gross understatement. Think gnocchi infused with dulse, a red seaweed native to the Pacific, topped with local diver Stephanie Mutz's uni and, of course, gold leaf. *Details.*

Our trio of welcome bites, fittingly, better represent art than food, each presented atop their own individual cake platter in a museum-worthy display. This much-awaited sneak peek into Caruso's culinary odyssey does not disappoint. A squid ink tapioca crisp cradles rare confit abalone in a yuzu vinaigrette, while a chilled tin of caviar awaits upon a bed of garlic basil mousse. We relish in the artistry of these initial bites, while puzzled by a most impossible task: how to select just four courses from the entirely fascinating prix-fixe menu. If, like me, you dread the all-too-overwhelming task of decision making, I suggest opting for the Chef's Tasting Menu, an 8-course sampling with a little bit of everything. A Standard wine pairing (or, if you're a true wine snob, the Elite) is also a must, as even those without a sommelier-trained tongue can appreciate the highly curated selections of Miramar's Director of Wine, Daniel Fish.

As is true of anywhere, the people make the place, and even at this establishment where the cuisine clearly does the talking, interacting

with the staff is an added indulgence. Chef Massimo himself hails from the Roman town of Trastevere (which you'll notice on the menu, under his dish "I Grew Up in Trastevere, You Should Try This Carbonara"), where he earned his early start in the trattorias of the ancient city. He's a man of few words, greeting guests with a kind handshake, a warm smile, and, if you're lucky, "I hope you enjoy," in his soft Italian drawl. Humble and approachable, he showcases a humility that pays homage to his heritage through reinvented classics—he's even invited his mother all the way from Rome to demonstrate how to make fettuccine fatte a mano (handmade) in their kitchen. Should you be so lucky as to engage with the chef, I encourage probing into his 30 years of culinary experience in Abu Dhabi and at the legendary Harry's Bar in Rome, a world-class stop that's served guests including Barack Obama, Woody Allen, and Claudia Schiffer. Needless to say, dining in Massimo's presence is quite literally as close as you can get to royal treatment.

After refreshing our glasses with rosé champagne, a flurry of antipasti adorns our tablecloth, and the culinary journey has truly begun. The Bluefin Ahi Tartare is a Michelin Guide-favorited course, whose umami flavors are transformed by one key ingredient: almond granita. Yes, this sweet Italian dessert melts into savory tuna and Taggiasca olives—yet, unsurprisingly, it works, balancing heavy saltiness with a light hint of vanilla. Hand-pulled Burrata con Le Fragole is

a heavenly treat ever so reminiscent of strawberries and cream, elevating the dish from a childhood staple to a Michelin-worthy dish. Paper-thin slices of osmosis strawberries couple with dehydrated ones, layering the creamy, silky burrata with varied texture, and finished with rhubarb for an herbaceous zing. Antipasti is rounded out by Yellowtail Crudo, balanced with gems of tangerine, finger lime, and pickled kumquats for a bright citrus tang.

As our glasses are refilled yet again, I'm curious to learn more about the restaurant's coveted Michelin Green Star, unbeknownst to many after its quiet debut in 2020. The star represents a devout commitment to sustainable gastronomy through altruistic work uplifting local farmers, fishermen, and ranchers, lessening environmental impact, and sourcing locally-grown seasonal ingredients that ultimately grace your final dish. Through action that is anything but performative, Caruso's is involved in every step of the culinary process, right down to the seeds planted for their house-fermented sourdough. The restaurant is a supporter of the Tehachapi Grain Project, which aims to preserve and harvest drought-tolerant organic heirloom grains right here in Southern California, additionally partnering with the California Wheat Commission to use only California Desert Drum in their pasta. 90% of the resort's seafood is sourced locally and sustainably, and much of the produce is either grown in the on-site vegetable garden, or from the farmer's market which Massimo attends himself every Saturday.

I witness one such facet of the Michelin Green Star during our bread service, an optional course that occurs between Antipasti and Primi upon request. The rustic sourdough bread is made with red fife and sonora wheat sourced directly from the Tehachapi Grain Project. As we embark upon our bread and butter journey, a three-step process involving caviar-bejeweled butter, a dulse-infused umami butter, and a drizzle of Il Fustino olive oil, there are two thoughts running through my mind: one, you can truly taste the intention behind this project, and two, bread and butter will never be the same.



Little do I know, my favorite dish—though this is a controversial topic well-suited for the debate floor—is just around the corner. With a penchant for pasta, I order the “I Grew Up in Trastevere, You Should Try This Carbonara,” largely because the name has me convinced that I really *should* try this Roman-born chef’s carbonara. I fall in love for three reasons: the charismatic title, the flavor complexity, and the audaciously wrong composition of Massimo’s nontraditional recipe. Simply put, this is not a carbonara—and before anyone gets offended at the abandonment of spaghetti and substitution of jamon iberico, Massimo is only allowed to do this because he, himself, is Italian. He turns the dish on its head, presenting a trio of ravioli using pureed house-cured guanciale, jamon iberico, and pecorino cheese as the filling, and white truffle for adornment. After this, I’m confident that three ravioli and an oaky chardonnay is really all it takes to reach *la dolce vita*.

In an instant, the signature umami scent of truffle infuses the air, and with it soon follows Hibachi Grilled Tenderloin. Buttery-smooth Angus Prime marries the aromatic truffle bordelaise, infusing every bite with that coveted melt-in-your-mouth piquancy and complexity on the palate. Paired with the weight and slight acidity of 100% Sangiovese Brunello, which Daniel Fish dubs the “kiss of Italy,” this dish is another menu stand out complete with foraged mushrooms, fiddlehead ferns, and a layered crispy potato pavé.

Channel Islands Halibut, conversely, is a bright, light protein with green garlic and burro fuso sauce, infused with wine from Dolce in Napa Valley. The smooth poached fish is accompanied by a single, yet hearty, stalk of white asparagus, a staple in French and German cuisine whose lack of chlorophyllic green is due to its entirely underground life cycle, seeing the light of day for the first time on my plate. Paired with 2019 Vincent Girardin Meursault Les Vieilles Vignes, a buttery and complex white wine, this dish is a lighter option for the meat-heavy Secondi—though for those who enjoy a plant-based diet, Caruso’s offers an entirely vegan prix-fixe menu.

The richness of truffle bordelaise, caviar butter, and four glasses of wine has certainly left me satiated, yet I’ve saved just enough room for one

more course, though I soon find out dessert is actually three. Pre-dessert is a one-bite palate cleanser with tiny rosemary cake soaking in Il Fustino olive oil, and topped with a scoop of lime sorbetto. Now that that’s out of the way, our real Dolci arrives. Our Bees Went to Ojai is a texture-rich, heavenly panna cotta that resembles real honeycomb, a work of art almost too perfect to touch. Pixie tangerine and Miramar-harvested honey add balance to this unique, multi-layered dessert. Our wine pairing, a golden elixir from Royal Tokaji, is what I imagine the Greek gods drank as their nectar—it tastes like liquid gold. “Kings and queens were drinking this five centuries ago,” remarks Daniel, sure enough. It’s not the first time throughout this dining experience that I’ve felt like royalty. The Bolle di Cioccolato, which literally translates to “bubbles of chocolate,” is a chocoholic’s dream, with Cara Cara orange pistou whose tangy citrus cuts through the rich 66% Valrhona base. Naturally, the dessert is garnished with edible gold. At this point I’ve almost died and gone to heaven, until our waiters return with something I didn’t think was possible—a post-dessert course. Mignardises, including limoncello bon bon, hazelnut nougat, and tangerine pate fruit, act as the cherry on top of a most astounding display of courses.

The clock has somehow reached 10 p.m., though we arrived at 5:30, and we’re one of the last parties to relish in the final beads of royal wine left hugging the glass. While I could likely recline in this chair, serenaded by the serene breaks of the Pacific, for several more hours, it’s long past time to drag myself back up the sweeping staircase, past the iconic *Miramar* sign, and through the perfumed lobby of the Manor House once again. Before standing, I glance once more at Massimo’s quote, printed in italics on the left hand side of the menu. “*The magic in cooking is the ability to give others so many sensations in such limited space, a dish! In the volatility of a bite.*” He must be exhausted, I muse, from dreaming up magic to delight the senses of hungry visitors, and besides, he likely has to tend to the property’s honeybees or charter a personal fishing boat to catch halibut in the morning. This down to earth dedication is why the visionary has, and will continue to, transform perspectives of this edible art form through his limited, yet wholly epic spaces—in the volatility of a bite.\*



BOLLE DI CIOCCOLATO