

S B L S

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A COASTAL FALL



*WAGYU, WINE, AND WORLD-CLASS
ARTISTRY AT FOUR SEASONS NAPA
VALLEY'S MICHELIN-STARRED AURO*

BY *Alexandra Lee*

Of all the quaint inns, grand chateaus and Michelin-starred meccas that dot the Napa Valley with bucolic charm, the Four Seasons name carries with it a different weight; expectations that are meant to be over-achieved, and a decades-long panache for the details. Lauded as the global hotel brand leader in Michelin stardom, with a total of 32 earned across its international portfolio, it's a seven-course dinner at Four Seasons Napa Valley that demonstrates to me exactly why. Fine dining outpost Auro, helmed by James Beard shortlister and *Top Chef* competitor Rogelio Garcia, is anything but a departure from the brand's reputation of excellence and innovation.

To say that Chef Rogelio's seven-course wine pairing dinner sets itself apart from the flurry of Michelin-rated institutions nestled between the valley's rows of vineyards is no small feat—but, it happens to be true. Just 20 miles north of Yountville, which is home to a string of Thomas Keller establishments including The French Laundry, Bouchon, Ad Hoc, and La Calenda, Auro is the only restaurant in the small town of Calistoga to hold a Michelin Star, earned just eight short months after its opening day.

It's late July. I'm greeted at the Four Seasons with a glass of Elusa sauvignon blanc, a product of the property's on-site winery, in an effort to cool-down from a sizzling country afternoon. We sip, in true farm-to-glass fashion, as we traipse along vineyards that create a patchwork of walkways through the gardens, guest cottages, and pools. Winemaker Jonathan Walden explains that guests are encouraged to pluck a grape or two off the vines, if they are so inclined. "It helps with the thinning process," he jokes. The tiny fruit camouflaged amongst the lush grapevine is just beginning to turn a juicy scarlet, in anticipation of harvest season.

Calistoga boasts a funky character compared to other Napa towns, home to tourist-flocked hot springs, mud baths, and a main street that loosely resembles a Western movie set. It also happens to be Napa's warmest AVA, with sweltering days contrasted by cool nights, and therefore home to some of the valley's best cabernet-producing vines. It's no surprise to me, therefore, that Elusa's cabernet, of which we get an exclusive tasting right from the new French oak barrel, packs a rich, hearty, and complex punch, even though it won't be bottled for another 12 to 14 months.

In the center of Auro's graceful terrace awaits a long table blooming in white florals and polished wine glasses, where our party feasts on bouts of chatter before the real amuse-bouches begin. Tokyo turnips dipped in truffle butter, A5 wagyu topped with caviar, citrus-cured Spanish octopus, and chocolate eggnog served in a real eggshell are among the initial temptations.

What makes Auro so much more than a "meal" are the accompanying theatrics. A harpist plays into the night, tempting me to forget that her romantic four-hour-long serenade is in fact live. The seashell placed before me is lifted with a flourish to reveal its sparkling contents, a delectable bite of Cape Cod scallop on a bed of crispy Koshihikari rice, sitting in a puddle of mojo verde. The wide eyes of a whole Kinki fish stare intently back from its serving platter as the sous chefs make their rounds of display—five minutes later, a delicately cooked filet reappears, unrecognizable, swimming in a mussel-pernod fumé sauce.

Or, there's the squab thigh that arrives with the claw still attached, so that you could quite literally pick up its bony leg, gingerly examine the long fingernails (perfectly intact), and then take a bite of meat as nonchalantly as if devouring a chicken drumstick. A personal favorite is the 10-day dry-aged hiramasa arranged with blood-red pluots to form the shape of a rose. A study in edible maximalism should be held behind the doors at Auro.

Chef Rogelio, who was born in Mexico City, infuses his cuisine with a multicultural DNA informed by a diverse culinary background, which includes a youth split between Los Angeles and Napa. Touches of familiar Mexican tang and spice, like a puddle of slightly sweet citrus-tamarind aguachile or a dollop of mole negro, are his distinctive calling cards. Also worth noting is the care

and creativity in which his team approaches any vegan or gluten-free diners, substituting the largely protein-heavy menu at ease, and without a lack of imagination.

Other standouts include the 21-day aged Kagoshima wagyu. It was this dish that made me realize I'd eaten wagyu, but I'd never really *had wagyu*—not like this. It's hard to even equate the delicacy with the word "beef." The marbled slab, more fat than flesh, all but melts on the tongue, with the slightest hint of crisp skin around its seared edges. Even better, it's served in a decadent, textured truffle sauce.

The team invites us into its all-glass kitchen (as if we had not been spying the whole time) for an insider peek at their domain, while we multitask on a "palate cleanser" of pluot-fingerlime lollipops. It's there that Chef Rogelio announces the release of his first cookbook, *Convivir*, which celebrates the very fusion of cultures and flavors we have experienced thus far.

The wines, selected to pair with each dish by Sommelier Derek Stevenson, are from only Napa Valley AVAs, ranging from crisp Calistoga chardonnay and sauvignon blanc to 2019 cabernet and late harvest semillon—a goblet of liquid gold. Brands including Alpha Omega, Stony Hill, and Knights Bridge, served out of whimsically-shaped decanters larger than my head, would be sure to capture the ogle of any Napa Valley wine connoisseur.

My mind tries not to ponder too soon what lunch will be (squash blossom pizza at TRUSS, or poolside tacos at Campo?) while I savor the last niblets of two desserts—farm peaches with sorbet on a miniature basil cake, and a sinful cinnamon buñuelo with chocolate cremeux. The resort, in itself, provides a simultaneous feast for the eyes, boasting experiences such as vineyard bike rides, cabana days, and thermal mud spa packages to unwind from such lavish culinary ventures. For Napa visitors, the Four Seasons resides at the pinnacle of relaxation and exploration, while escaping definition as a 5-star hotel, restaurant, or winery alone.

Auro itself is a play on words. A fusion of "*aura*" and "*oro*," the Spanish word for gold, the title is symbolic of Chef Rogelio's fervor to add a "touch of gold" to any guest's experience. And, if you're lucky enough to stumble upon it, you may find that in the middle of wine country, the mother lode indeed does exist.*



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HAWAIIAN AMBERJACK AT AURO
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