



THE grand. tasting menu

story by Marlene Parrish, photos by Heather Mull

Congratulations, Lautrec! Nemaquin Woodlands Resort has been recognized by the prestigious Mobil Travel Guide with Five Star rankings for Lautrec Restaurant. “Mobil Five-Star restaurants deliver a flawless dining experience, consistently providing exceptional food, superlative service, elegant décor and exquisite presentations,” the guide says. Lautrec also boasts the AAA Five Diamond Award. Lautrec is one of only 14 restaurants in the country to earn top ratings from both AAA and Mobil.

When my husband, Bob Wolke, and I needed a mid-season break, we chose to go to Nemaquin. With all of its diamonds, stars, amenities and distractions, Nemaquin would be a treat. And the two-hour drive to Uniontown from home was just long enough to set up a festive yet leisurely mood.

Most guests at the resort exert themselves, by skiing, snowboarding, playing golf and tennis, hiking, fly-fishing, rock climbing, mountain biking, trail riding and more. But we are cityfied, concrete cowboys, preferring creature comforts to competition. Our goal was to eat well and see as much of the on-property \$45 million art collection as possible.

We had reservations at Lautrec, the resort's flagship restaurant located in the Chateau. The restaurant is named after French artist Henri de Toulouse Lautrec, and it is acclaimed for the culinary artwork of Chef Dave Racicot and his innovative cuisine, specifically his ingredient-driven Grand Tasting Menu. In order to understand his food, it helps to understand the chef. For me, that meant homework. Racicot and I met in the afternoon.

“The Grand Tasting Menu is our vision of what food and service should be,” Racicot says. “It is designed to be a multi-sensory experience that

challenges the way the diner thinks about food. We prefer that guests know what they are getting into, that they are here to dine and not simply to eat.”

The Grand Tasting Menu consists of 15 to 17 courses, with each course flowing from the one before and into the one after it. Serving small quantities is key. “Portion size is determined by the purpose of each course in the tasting menu,” Racicot says. “There will be from one to four bites.” Wine pairings are optional, with a general wine pairing and the higher priced Sommelier's Grand Pairings.

Do diners have to understand his vision? Must they “get it” to appreciate the experience? “Not really,” Racicot says. “We have done our job if the guest leaves knowing that the food was good and the service impeccable.” To that end, he trusts in the crack teamwork of the Lautrec staff: Wine-and-spirits manager Alan Uchirnsco, general manager Trey Matheu and Racicot himself in the kitchen with sous chef Dan Mungeer.

It took seven months for Racicot to organize, pace and sequence the progression of the grand tasting menu, mold the specific flavor profiles and coordinate the chemistry and physics of the preparations. His juxtapositions play with tastes that are savory, acidic,

astringent, sweet, bitter and salty, with effects that might be decadent, delightful, funny, shocking, comforting or surprising. There might also be a double-cross or two.

Racicot is an intense, focused young man who does not suffer fools. When asked if he provisions his kitchen with foods that are local and seasonal, he huffed, “That's like asking a chef if he uses salt! Of course I do. The only cans in the kitchen are tomato paste and the peanuts I snack on.”

He admires chefs Thomas Keller of The French Laundry, Patrick O'Connell of The Inn at Little Washington and Heston Blumenthal of The Fat Duck outside London. All three of those men are self-educated chefs, as is Racicot. He has been cooking for 12 of his 30 years, with scarcely time for family and no time for travel. “Seeing other people's food is of little interest unless I understand it. I need to know the science behind food and cooking.”

Racicot has no signature dish. His approach is his signature.

Le Menu Degustation

In addition to the house menu, most upper-echelon chefs follow the trend of offering a tasting menu, or the *menu degustation* – an expensive, lengthy, multi-course dinner that is challenging for both chef and diner.

Ancient Roman banquets aside, the roots of today's tasting menus are in Berkeley. When Alice Waters opened Chez Panisse there in 1971, she offered a five-course, fixed-price menu that changed daily, and the multi-course set menu soon became fashionable.

At about that time, the *nouvelle cuisine* movement was taking off in France, where chefs were offering smaller portions spread over longer dinners. When Americans traveled to Europe and experienced these *menus degustation*, they began to look forward to having that style of dining here in the U.S. Today's “grazing,” tapas and small-plate menus are in a similar vein.

Many chefs believe that they can express the full reach of their creativity only through the total control that a tasting menu affords them. And it's true: You can't eat one appetizer and one entree and claim to know the range of the chef's skills or the scope of a restaurant's capabilities.

As for diners, the tasting menu offers the luxury of resting in the hands of a culinary *wunderkind* while expanding their knowledge of food and cooking. And not least, many diners, having experienced a tasting menu in their travels, may have saved up for that one meal in some far-off culinary mecca and would like to have the experience here at home. The tasting menu is a win-win for both chef and diner.

Grand Tasting Menu



grand tasting menu

Lautrec is a room of many reds, with warm-hued wooden panels and curvaceous banquettes. Where you sit is critical. The privacy of the tables on the room's perimeter is fine if you want to whisper secrets. But the food is designed to engage all senses, and to really see the compositions of the dishes ask to be seated towards the better-lighted center of the room.

White Chocolate Caviar

Salty caviar spooned over one sweet bite of silky panna cotta, placed just so on a pearlescent saucer. The black-tie combination was a formal introduction to the 14 courses to come.

Blue Crab Coconut, Mango, Lime, Kiwi

A bundle of lump crab toppled over unsweetened coconut cream with teeny cubes of mango, kiwi and lime, the subtle flavors and pastel colors set off by a bright green cilantro seedling.

Celery Root Red Curry Custard, Almond, Dried Bacon, Warm Cider

Is it too early to have a favorite? Fireworks in the mouth from red curry custard, the crunch of almond, the salt of bacon and a lush warm cider sauce. A small slice of barely sweet apple bread balanced the textures. The wine pairing, an amontillado sherry, was so perfect, we laughed with delight. Three bites and two sips? No, no, more please.

By now we were feeling totally pampered. The service was seamless, with dishes cleared, fresh flatware laid and the next course flowing smoothly. Settling in, half-listening to the low Frank Sinatra soundtrack, we relaxed into the rhythm of the meal.

Skate Traditional Garnishes

I have to say that for me, this one did not stand up to the superb Chateaufort-du-Pape Blanc. After taking in the finger-size piece of skate, butter bubbles, lemon gel and crispy fried capers, I wrote this note-to-self: Make skate for supper, sauté in brown butter and garnish with lemon and capers.

Tuna or Lobster Malt, Vanilla, Banana

My tuna sashimi and tartare with avocado quenelles and crisp fried wonton were fresher than fresh. An allergy kept me from the lobster course, but my husband loved the dish, with its pairing of malt, vanilla and banana.

White Bean Several Garnishes, Bliss Maple Cream

A scholar could get a thesis out of the myriad tastes, flavors, textures, shapes and, yes, the colossal nerve of these mind-bending pairings: A mound of humble white bean puree was a platform, a canvas, for a cube of molasses gel, a mound of roasted garlic, a bubble cluster of green apple jam, a cube of bay leaf tea gel, a shard of brittle chorizo, a chewy and wildly delicious bite of Kurobuta ham (the Japanese pork equivalent of Kobe beef), the entire composition surrounded by a moat of very subtly flavored maple cream. I'm still mulling this complicated presentation. But it totally worked.

Bread Tray

Mediterra Bakehouse bread is served, and guests may spread it with either goat butter and sea salt or cow butter with apricot salt.

Truffle Fettucini, Parmesan

It's always a thrill to see generous shavings of black truffle, in this case topping a tangle of soft-wheat fettucine. Parmigiano-Reggiano supported the pair and oomphed the umami.

Parsnip Grapefruit, Hazelnuts, Lemongrass Pudding, Butter

This was an intended wake-up call in case taste buds were flagging. A cakey parsnip base with lemongrass pudding was topped with a squirry butter ball (watch out, tie), crunchy hazelnut crumbles and a puckery grapefruit segment. Everybody up?

Yuzu Sesame, Green Tea, Cilantro

Jelled dice-sized yuzu (a Japanese citrus fruit) was matched with jabs of soy, green tea and black sesame. Another just-clipped cilantro sprout added flavor and a grace note.

Beef Soy Bean, Cucumber Seed, Gyoza, Soy

This combo fell a bit short for me, personally. The presentation: a small portion of sirloin paired with edamame puree, cucumber, sweet soy gel and a tortilla chip. My solace? Every drop of the Gevrey-Chambertin from Burgundy.

Lamb Pomegranate, Caramelized Onion, Mustard Seed, Yogurt

Now we're talkin'. Fork-tender Elysian Fields lamb loin was flanked by rutabaga marbles, braised mustard seeds, a celery ribbon and a crunch of panko. On the side, a mound of caramelized onion puree, a stripe of yogurt, pomegranate pudding and a few pomegranate seeds for emphasis. In the glass, a rosy Chateaufort-du-Pape. What fun, what food!

This was no time, about two hours into the experience, to hit the wall. We were satisfied, but not sated, a bit buzzy, but not even close to intoxication. And there were four more courses coming.

Foie Gras Lady Apple, Cinnamon

You expected a lobe? Shaved dried foie gras (a first for us) was scattered over cool lady-apple custard, enhanced by a pop of sweet peach jelly and a dash of Thai cinnamon. This was matched with a Riesling Spätzle.

Tapioca Pineapple, Passionfruit

Shades of the nursery? Not quite. Tiny tapioca beads suspended in a creamy pudding with dice of pineapple and passion fruit. A coconut tuille added welcome crunch.

Chocolate Caramel, Peanut Butter Ice Cream, Brittle

Strike up the band and go out in style! Dense chocolate cake cubes were paved with chewy caramel ganache and set off with a tiny scoop of peanut-butter ice cream, nut brittle, dark chocolate mousse and a dash of chocolate sauce. A liqueur glass of Pineau des Charentes (a blend of cognac, Cabernet and Merlot) gave the exclamation point of a fabulous dinner.

Altoids Chocolate, Menthol

But wait. What's this? A frozen ball of mentholated, undetermined creaminess was presented on the metal lid of an Altoids can. A delicious joke. And, of course, curiously strong.