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RESTAURANT REVIEW: Morels French Steakhouse & Bistro

Taste of Heaven: Morels offers soothing dining experience with great service, ambiance

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REVIEW-JOURNAL

Is tap water OK?" our waiter asked. "Or would you prefer bottled?"

Whoa. When's the last time you heard *downselling* in a Strip restaurant?

And when we replied "tap," he assured us that the restaurant -- Morels French Steakhouse & Bistro at the Palazzo -- had good-tasting water, owing to a particularly effective filtration system.

Music to my ears. Followers of this space know how much the "Still or sparkling?" thing irritates me, because it ropes in the lambs-to-the-slaughter tourists for bottled-water markups of several hundred percent, and because I -- all of us -- can specify bottled water if that's what we want, thank you very much.

And times are turning against the bottle. Like a lot of people, I'm beginning to feel plenty guilty about the cases of bottles I bring home from Trader Joe's (mainly for convenience) because of the fossil fuels associated with them and the room they take up in our landfills, since so many of them are not recycled. With restaurant industry leaders including Alice Waters -- some coincidence there, eh? -- leading the way, it's clear the tap is back.

As our dinner at Morels progressed, it also was clear that the water thing was no aberration; this is a restaurant that pays attention to the details, much to its credit.

For example: Oddly enough, for some reason I'd had a craving that day for some really good yeast rolls, and lo and behold, at Morels, an assistant waiter delivers the rolls from a European-style spiral basket traditionally used for proofing breads. They were Siamese-twinlike rolls -- two rounds joined together. And we were served a little cylinder of butter rolled in red Hawaiian sea salt, plus tapenade.

The adventure continued with the smoked salt (wonderful on steak), fleur de sel and pink sea salt that were brought with our entrees.

We also were served a delightful little amuse-bouche -- a prosciutto-wrapped fig with cherry-ginger reduction.

Service was perfect, from the black napkins for those wearing dark clothing to the appropriate flatware brought well in advance of our needing it (even cocktail forks for the amuse-bouche) to the water, wine and coffee refilled promptly and unobtrusively.

The cheese selection tempted mightily as we walked past because this is one of the best selections in town (though the seafood bar was no slouch), and I'd love to return sometime for a late-night cheese plate and a glass of wine, but for now it was down to business. Mushroom bisque (\$8) was the soup de

jour, and it was wonderfully well-executed with lots of texture and the deep earthiness of the forest.

The flavors of nature were evoked, as well, in the daily grilled fish (\$31), but this time it was the sea, in the Loch Duart salmon. This fish is farm-raised but with great care (and in sustainable fashion), and has much the rich, brine-inflected flavor of wild-caught. It was accompanied by a melange of roasted vegetables -- asparagus, zucchini, carrots and more -- and a dab of basil-infused (*heavily* basil-infused) potato puree.

The garden appeared, as well (plus the flavors of childhood summers), in the Summer Heirloom Tomato Salad (\$15), with its lushly ripe, full-of-flavor (that's the heirloom aspect) tomatoes; house-made pickled onions like Mom used to make; a generous portion of burrata, the cream-infused fresh mozzarella; arugula for a balancing shot of austerity; and a bracing vinaigrette of olive oil and a reduction of grape must.

A 16-ounce, "100-percent natural" Kansas City Steak (\$46) was medium-rare as ordered and full of deep, well-aged flavor. With some chagrin, we noted that there wasn't a steak of less than 14 ounces -- or \$34 -- on this menu, in keeping with current stratospheric Strip steakhouse prices. And, in keeping with steakhouse tradition, our steak came with ... steak. So on the side we had some of the Truffled Creamed Summer Corn (\$8) highly touted by our waiter, and it was a great suggestion -- creamy but with plenty of crunch in the just-off-the-cob corn, and more crunch in the topping that seemed to be laced with panko.

The profiteroles dessert (\$9) was a veritable bargain by Strip proportions, three cream puffs filled with rich vanilla ice cream, topped with a hot chocolate sauce and with a cloud of whipped cream on the side.

And the entire experience was quite soothing, owing in part to the excellent service, in part to the gentle ambience of the room with its gray-blue walls and subtly romantic monumental paintings, soft (but not dim) lighting and light jazz music. And on a more temperate day, I think the seating on the patio would be just grand.

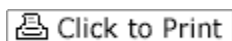
The patio also would be a fine spot to sample some of the cocktail list; with such selections as Lillet Blanc, Pimm's No. 1 and nine different gins, this is one of the most extensive in town, nearly rivaling the restaurant's deep and varied wine list.

It's true that God is in the details. And our experience at Morels was nothing short of heavenly.

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