

**Fine dining in fine surroundings**

*by Dawn White, SLO Tribune, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008*

When I visited the Cass House earlier this year, I was charmed by its immaculate fixtures, lovely gardens, restored stately rooms and overall pristine appearance. But it seemed a shame that it was only open twice a week for brunch, leaving its beautiful dining room empty much of the time.

That's not the case since chef Jensen Lorenzen and his fiancée, Grace Wingett, took over culinary operations. The pair has reopened a restaurant that is equal in sophistication and elegance to the classy inn that houses it.

The pair previously ran Papillon in Los Osos, and some questioned why they'd leave their charming bistro near the bay to open a fine-dining restaurant in seasonally busy Cayucos. But the Cass House allows them to move their culinary creativity up a notch by offering seasonal three-and four-course dinner menus.

Also, Hoppe's has operated successfully in Cayucos for years, and there's no apparent reason that there isn't room for two of the county's best restaurants to be in one oceanfront town.

The menu is modern but pays tribute to classic culinary methods often seen in French and Southern cuisine. The ingredients are fresh and often local, resulting in a constantly evolving menu.

Diners can opt for the three-course (\$48) or fourcourse (\$56) dinner with choices ranging from a stone fruit and wild arugula salad to a variation of liver and onions that includes seared foie gras and red onion jam, or a classic strip loin cake topped with a fried quail egg.

On a recent visit on a warm summer evening, my husband and I both started with salads. His, a mix of earthy wild arugula, peaches, honey, basil and buratta (an Italian cheese), was sweetened slightly with a balsamic reduction. My Cass' garden greens salad combined roasted beets with lemon cucumbers, feta and pine nuts in a lemon-vanilla vinaigrette. The vanilla flavor of the dressing was prevalent and worked surprisingly well with the lemon in the vinaigrette. Although this is similar to many restaurant salads, Lorenzen's pairing of quality ingredients and dressing made it a standout.

The second course gets more exotic with choices including crispy veal sweetbreads, soft shell crab and a fried green tomato “BLT.”

My husband couldn’t resist the “this little piggy went to the market” dish, which is a fun twist on pork. It was served two ways—crisped up and slow-braised, both with a syrupy maple sauce.

I chose the soft-shell crab, which is fried and placed atop a tangle of fresh purslane (an herb), corn, fennel, avocado and cherry tomatoes. Crisped bits of bacon were scattered on the plate and added a bit of salty crunch to the cool vegetables. The dish is a bit rich but delicious.

The entrées are portioned just right, slightly larger than the appetizers. With multiple courses, I never understand restaurants that seem determined to leave you stuffed. The arctic char is a flavorful pink fish that tastes a bit like salmon and trout. Seared to a brown crisp, it comes atop summer succotash, the chef’s gnocchi, caper butter and char roe. The fish is fattier than salmon, making it all the more creamy and flakey. With the vegetables and velvety gnocchi, it was buttery, rich and flavorful. For the rabbit entrée, prosciutto is wrapped around a roasted loin cut and served with a pile of wild chanterelle and morel mushrooms, peas and orzo. This is also a flavorful dish, and it is nice to see a restaurant serving more meats than steak, fish and chicken.

One might be tempted to skip dessert after such a rich and satisfying meal, but that would be a mistake. The “coffee hour” dessert pairs a freshly-fried French cruller (similar to a doughnut), walnut crisps and espresso semifreddo (a creamy partially frozen custard). Then, a warm chocolate sauce is poured over the three by the server, making this a fabulous combination of chocolate, sweetness, gooeyness and crunch.

The service is on par with the restaurant’s cuisine. It seems more and more restaurants employ staff who don’t know the menu, the cuisine or how to read the customer. Our server gave recommendations on each course, wine and dessert.

The Cass House Restaurant may be a bit of a luxury price-wise, but it does deliver one of the best fine-dining experiences on the Central Coast.