

Cultural Daily

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Palm Springs' SO•PA – otherworldly al fresco dining

R. Daniel Foster · Wednesday, April 24th, 2019

The Palm Springs culinary scene continues to match the city's youthful reinvention as the capital of cool.

There's Workshop Kitchen + Bar [which I covered](#) a few years back—and indeed once again since the place impressed me so much. Other mentions: [Truss & Twine](#), [Wilma and Frieda](#), [Il Corso](#), [Evzin](#)—and the latest on my list: [SO•PA](#), located at [L'Horizon Resort & Spa](#) on East Palm Canyon Drive.

A dining terrace with an otherworldly feel

The dining is wholly al fresco, which makes sense for the desert community, although most anyone knows that Palm Springs can get damn cold in winter. No worries, there are heat lamps.

The triangle-shaped terrace is set with mesquite trees, a fountain, and fire line. There are also globe-encased light fixtures, some blubs twisted like ribboned candy. The entire effect gives the space a comfortable otherworldly feel.



SO•PA dining terrace | Photo courtesy L'Horizon

Producer Jack Wrather's retreat for Hollywood pals

The terrace was converted from a badminton court, a leftover from the old Horizon Hotel, a property originally built by renowned architect William F. Cody in 1952. Producer Jack Wrather (*Lassie*, *The Lone Ranger*) had it built as a retreat for his Hollywood pals, including Betty Grable and Marilyn Monroe. Also: the Reagans and Nixons.



L'Horizon Resort & Spa | Photo courtesy L'Horizon

Wrather's retreat became a dedicated hotel in the 1970s, and after a few decades, grew a bit rundown. Designer [Steve Hermann](#) remastered the three-acre property in 2015. The \$5 million renovation transformed 25 bungalows into exclusive private residences set amid dozens of water features, fire pits, blazing torches, and an infinity-edge pool.

A James Beard Award-nominated chef

Chef Garrett Melkonian currently oversees SO•PA; his last restaurant was Seattle’s Mamnoon, a “modern union of middle eastern cuisines.” At SO•PA, you’ll notice some of that influence (try the whipped labneh, done expertly with Taggiasca olives, citrus, and thyme.)

In 2014, Melkonian was nominated for the James Beard Award for Best Chef of the Northwest.

The meal begins

For starters, our party had the marinated olives (Marcona almonds, charred bread), heirloom chicories, burrata, and the “Pommes Paillasson.” The olives were bathed in a light blend of oils – nice, and the burrata was spritzed with a 25-year-aged balsamic, lending a bright, as well as slightly sweet, tone.



The burrata was spritzed with a 25-year-aged balsamic. | Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The pommes: a crispy potato confit done up in brown butter, a “Yuzu Kosho” hollandaise (a Japanese seasoning with chiles as well as zest and juice from the citrus, yuzu). Also: white sturgeon caviar.

For main courses, we sampled the lasagna, acorn squash, duck breast, and wild Alaskan sockeye salmon.

From comfort food to a signature dessert

The lasagna was one big chunk o’comfort food – a beautiful crispy crust, crunchy top and hearty middle that included mushroom duxelle, fromage blanc, truffle tremor (a soft-ripened goat’s cheese), cauliflower puree and lemon leaf.

The acorn squash harbored subtle flavors – complex and intriguing (thyme, pumpkin seed oil, cranberry, saffron, maitake mushroom), but the jasmine rice was overcooked.



The acorn squash harbored subtle flavors, including pumpkin seed oil. | Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The duck breast arrived in a sweet and sour glaze, parsnip and tripled fried rice – no complaints, as with the salmon: a pepper paste marinade and wrapped in Swiss chard with stewed garbanzo and Castelvetrano olives, which Bon Appétit calls “[the best olives, hands down.](#)”

Dessert brought SO•PA’s signature pear sorbet with honeycomb, anchoring the dish with a natural essence.

Persian-Japanese tacos

We chatted up our waiter, Shahram (“just call me Ken”). He told us of his Persian-Japanese heritage (his mother is from Okinawa). He mused of one day opening a taco stand in Okinawa, “some sort of Persian-Japanese” fusion, he said. “They only do standard beef tacos there.”

We encouraged Shahram’s dream of an Okinawa taco stand, and we promised to visit.



We chatted up our waiter, Shahram. | R. Daniel Foster

Top image courtesy [L'Horizon Resort & Spa](#)

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