

April/May 2006
\$15 per year
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Charlotte
Wine & Food
Weekend
2006

A Taste of Napa Valley in the Lowcountry

A friend of mine, who perhaps knows me better than I know myself, recently told me that I find balance through contrast. Those of you who follow *Charlotte Taste* may see the work and pleasure of publishing a food, wine and travel lifestyle magazine as a glamorous pursuit. *That* it is, and I wouldn't trade it for the world, but the hours are demanding and the work is non-stop. Long weekend trips to California Wine Country are fewer and farther between, and although they are immensely pleasurable, two full travel days, a sizeable time zone leap and non-stop vineyard visits followed by late evening dinners leave me in need of a vacation day when I return. If you've spent a weekend in Napa or Sonoma, you know the drill.

If only we could find a way to have our flourless chocolate ganache cake and eat it too....

Alas, a larger-than-life Napa Valley name has chosen to set up shop in the middle of 20,000 acres of pristine wilderness in South Carolina – yes, you heard me right – just outside of Hilton Head, less than four hours from your doorstep. Granted, 150 year old magnolias and live oaks have been substituted for the eucalyptus and palm trees, but at Auberge du Soleil's new sister property, the Inn at Palmetto Bluff, you will find all of the world-class accommodations you'd expect from this Napa Valley icon.

The original Auberge is not only synonymous with Thomas Keller's

French Laundry in terms of its culinary esteem and wine program, the Inn has made one of the most discriminating top travel lists in the world for the past 20 years – *Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report*. Auberge was founded by a San Francisco restaurateur named Claude Rouas, who envisioned a tribute to his beloved Provence in the California wine country. Rouas opened the Auberge du Soleil Restaurant in 1981. It was an instant sensation, attracting discerning diners from Northern California and all over the world with its airy, elegant Mediterranean style and its French-influenced regional cuisine. The Inn and restaurant's architecture were the work of influential designer Michael Taylor (credited by *Architectural Digest* for changing decorating history and the way we live). Critics called it *Casa Vogue*, "the kind of hotel so often found in Europe – secluded, discreet and elegant – and with wonderful food" and "a masterpiece of design."

The 20,000-acre tract known as Palmetto Bluff where Auberge's new property sits extends from the headwaters of the May River near the town of Bluffton and skirts Bull and Daufuskie Islands via the Cooper River to its east. The land is owned and being developed by Crescent Resources, which employs a team of architects and land planners destined to create an award-winning community based on their talent and synergy. The land is so rich in culture

and history that Crescent also employs a full time archeologist to research and catalog uncovered bits of history. Guests in the mood to discover the Indiana Jones in their alter ego can even arrange private tours to accompany the staff archeologist on digs.

Driving onto the property (which I actually missed and had to turn around to find because it was so discreetly marked) you will pass hundreds of homesites in various stages of development. The secluded road meanders along miles of walking trails amidst the birds, alligators and creatures of this breathtaking maritime forest before you come to the water's edge where the resort and town center sit. A large, wide-open, grassy area with steps and columns from plantation ruins sits in the center and is flanked by ancient trees, a park on the water's edge, a few shops and restaurants, a historical center and a small chapel that guests often use for destination weddings. The resort's main building which houses the front desk, offices, a restaurant, a cellar and meeting rooms is so unpretentious with its full wrap-around porch, it's hard to discern where the front entrance is. The team that greeted me knew my name as soon as I pulled in, and I was addressed by it all weekend (how do they know that?).

There are no hotel-style rooms at the property – all guests stay in individual cottages accessible by golf cart or one of the beachcomber bicycles. All are as gra-

– By Katherine Stefan, Photos Courtesy of Inn at Palmetto Bluff



ciously decorated as Auberge's Michael Taylor-designed maisons, but with classic Lowcountry casual elegance, timeless enough to have been appointed generations ago. Rich matelasse, sumptuous down, chenille and woven cottons cover the beds and upholstery. Windows are plantation shutter clad. The walk-in 'wardrobe' is bigger than an average guest bedroom. And the bathrooms are – well – to die for. Bedecked wall-to-wall and ceiling-to-floor in mosaic black and white veined marble tile, the long, narrow, private sunlit space is complete with a period appropriate soaking tub, fixtures, and a three-shower-headed steam room. I must confess I spent more time in that space and on the back screened porch than any other on this very decompressing weekend.

After a week of wearing too many hats, I opted on the first night to ignore the mounds of work I brought with me, don the French terry robe, indulge in a bath and take my delicious room service grazing meal alone. And I've already apologized to my food editor Kim for having popped the bottle of '96 Veuve I'd been carrying around in my trunk for her Christmas gift to indulge in with my room service delicacies: fried green tomato salad, she crab soup and chocolate covered strawberries. A month's worth of stress melted away within hours.

Early to bed, early to rise is the best plan at Palmetto Bluff. Each cottage is appropriately equipped with a bird watching manual, binoculars, suntan lotion, insect repellent and matches (for the candles – they are not expecting boy scouts, mind you!). I again took room service out on the porch to watch the sun rise, hear the birds chirp and watch the squirrels play hide and seek. Never in all my travels have I felt closer to nature than in this very spot.

The resort's activities center around taking advantage of the land's natural bounties. A golf course already rumored

by connoisseur golf friends of mine to be destined for awards is sculpted out of the Audubon-like habitat. Canoes sit at the foot of the bridge and guests do not even have to bother with formal checkout procedures to use them. Boating, kayaking, fly fishing, yacht charters and beach excursions to neighboring Hilton Head Island are at your fingertips. The Inn also boasts exceptional kids' camps that infuse history, culture and science into the day.

But the most unique resort activity I've seen in five years of travel writing is the Watercolor for the Traveler series painting class. Hilton Head artist and Director of The Gallery at Palmetto Bluff, Linda Rorer conducts guests on art technique developed from her experiences while living in Africa and France and on her travels. Linda holds two degrees in art and is certified to teach kindergarten through graduate level to help participants learn to recreate their experience with the natural surroundings as they explore Palmetto Bluff. Each student receives a complete painting kit especially chosen for the traveler, including a set of top-grade English watercolor paints, brushes, imported watercolor paper and a 2-hour *plein air* instructional painting lesson while adventuring all over Palmetto Bluff.

The full service spa is world class. I indulged in their signature Vichy Rain Forest massage and body scrub – a two-hour indulgence during which you are gently laid on a warm table and draped in towels. Soon they become immersed in water as gentle showerheads float up and down your body before an exfoliation and full body massage. All staff members are *exceptional* and the spa space itself is one I know I will return to when my travel is all pleasure.

The food program at the Inn at Palmetto Bluff is as you would expect from the sister property of the number two Napa restaurant. The Inn has three restaurants and puts on regular Oyster

Roasts that are favorites of the culinary staff since they can be out in the open working with their hands and mingling with guests. The River House where I dined with general manager Jim Beley and had the opportunity to speak with the chef is the flagship restaurant of the property.

Executive Chef Steve Jordan's style of cooking is perfectly suited to the Lowcountry. His elegant use of French culinary technique and years spent working in wine country (he was with Auberge's new Calistoga property several years before coming to the South) fuse seamlessly with the bounty of indigenous seasonal cooking ingredients. Jim and I shared a delicious foie gras appetizer and a special appetizer of seared sashimi tuna before I dove into a delicious monkfish, richly prepared in a truffle crême sauce. And although Jim and I started off on formal business terms, I had no problem by the third course accepting his offer to sample Chef Steve's Mushroom Risotto Parmesan – enough to make the strictest of zero net carb subscribers break their silly rules. My bold move to sample Jim's meal was surpassed by an even bolder move to ask for the recipe. A trio of whimsical desserts, including a standout sweet potato crepe with mascarpone filling finished off a lovely evening before I retired to my cottage to watch the rest of the locally filmed *Prince of Tides*.

My departure the next morning was bittersweet. Although I was anxious to return home to my children and to get organized for a big week, I easily could have lingered another few days with absolutely nothing to do. So whether you long for a touch of Napa Valley on a weekend whim, or relish the idea of sitting on your back porch painting landscapes, watching birds and squirrels or otherwise existing in the moment, you now have a lovely new option for a weekend or holiday getaway. ■

