

Angeleno

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MODERNLUXURY.COM



JUNE 2010 \$5.95

CASEY AFFLECK: MYSTERY MAN



Culina

RATING ★★★

300 S. Doheny Dr., L.A.,
310.860.4000,
culinarerestaurant.com

What the stars mean:
0 = poor, unacceptable
★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities
★★ = good, above average
★★★ = very good, well above norm
★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best
★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary in every detail.

Reviews are based on multiple visits.
Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

HOURS Sun.–Wed., 6:30AM–10:30PM;
Thurs.–Sat., 6:30AM–11PM

WHO'S THERE *Hip-hop moguls, movie stars, Korean businessmen, ladies who lunch and Larry Flynt*

ABOUT THE WINE *This is cool: The sommelier will open and serve by the half-bottle (i.e., carafe) just about any wine on the list.*

ABOUT THE NOISE *Refreshingly whisper-friendly despite all the frenzy*

WHAT IT COSTS *Lunch, appetizers \$9–\$28; sandwiches/pizzas/pastas \$14–\$24; entrées \$19–\$38; desserts \$8. Dinner, appetizers \$9–\$32; pizzas/pastas \$14–\$28; entrées \$19–\$49; desserts \$8. Corkage \$50. Valet parking \$6 (complimentary at lunch).*

Culina Paradiso

The Four Seasons demolished its old-fashioned dining room and replaced it with something much fresher, hipper and very Italian | By Brad A. Johnson | Photography by Peden + Munk |

I'm not a fan of raw salmon. It always tastes too much like, well, raw salmon. Nothing triggers my gag reflex faster. Or that's what I'm thinking as I'm ordering a sampler of raw fish at Culina, the new Italian restaurant at the Four Seasons Hotel. I get to choose three. I've already picked tuna and lobster, but I can't decide on the third. "Should we try the yellowtail or the shrimp?" I ask. To which the waitress responds, "Try the salmon. It's amazing."

I fight the urge to roll my eyes and judge this young woman as silly and naïve, and before I can say anything, my dinner guests have responded to her suggestion with glee. So, I acquiesce. "OK," I say. "Let's try the salmon."

When the crudo arrives, I dive straight for the lobster. It tastes like it's been drenched in clarified butter (the lobster's own doing) and delivers a subtle, tongue-tingling sensation of grapefruit and chive oil (the chef's doing). Fantastic. I wish there were more of it. I reach next for the tuna, a beautiful little rectangle of brilliant red color. Ginger sings across my tongue, followed by an echo of lemon and sea salt. I want more. But the only thing left now is that salmon. I reluctantly scoop it up and bring it toward my mouth like a child being forced cough syrup. Then something miraculous happens.

My mouth forms a smile as I hesitantly begin to chew. I wish I could see my face because I've been told that I make funny expressions when I've been proved wrong.

The salmon is exquisite. Salmon has never tasted like this before. This is exactly how I have always hoped it might taste. There's a slight orange, citrus-y note on top to match its color, followed by the briny sea mist of a salted caper. I glance at the plate and notice there's still another bite up for grabs. My hand moves so quickly, it makes that swooshing sound that we always hear in movies when someone moves really fast. I'm smiling again.

Culina has replaced the hotel's stuffy old dining room, Gardens, and is everything that restaurant never dared to be: modern, vibrant, airy, sexy. It's the hottest spot in Beverly Hills at the moment. "Look, there's Enrique Iglesias!" "Look, there's Joe Jonas!" The front patio is abuzz with neighborhood regulars, yet the Four Seasons still feels like an oasis. Most of the outdoor patio is now covered with hardwood floors (faux, but fab). The fireplace roars most nights, and the heat lamps resemble gargantuan tiki torches. At a crudo bar just inside the entrance, a young chef assembles raw fish atop marble-like slabs of pink salt (used as serving plates).



RAH, RAH, RAW!
From left: Culina's crudo bar, where raw fish is transformed; baby octopi with beans and harissa; the dining room as seen from the patio.



Four Seasons' executive chef Ashley James is still in the house, but he's brought in a rising star, Victor Casanova, to oversee the new kitchen. Casanova launched his career in New York working under some of that city's top chefs (Daniel Boulud, Scott Conant, Cesare Casella). Most recently he headed the Italian restaurant at the Phoenician in Arizona. There's a new pastry chef at the hotel, too: Federico Fernandez (Four Seasons Buenos Aires), and his desserts are sublime, including a beautiful tiramisu and truly cloudlike rice pudding.

To be honest, the last thing this neighborhood needed was another Italian restaurant. Go five blocks in any direction from the hotel, and Italian restaurants are all you'll see. But Culina fills a void. Aside from a handful of obligatory dishes like prosciutto-wrapped melon or a pounded, breaded veal chop (both superb), the menu feels refreshingly different.

I've worked my way through the entire crudo menu and have yet to find a piece of raw fish I didn't love. In fact, I've enjoyed far superior fish here than at most sushi restaurants around town (except for the top few hard-core purists like Urasawa or Mori).

The service at Four Seasons has always been polished yet casual, and that's still the case, even though I hardly recognize any of the current crew from the previous restaurant. The *maitre d'* is a gregarious Italian who seems to know everyone in the room. He invites himself to sit down at my table and takes control of the conversation. He has a tendency to overshare. He wants us to know that he's an actor, of course. And he boasts about the restaurant's \$20,000 pasta machine. I think maybe he exaggerates just a little. But the homemade pastas are excellent, especially the bucatini carbonara and the pappardelle with lamb ragu, pecorino cheese and mint.

Waiters are constantly pushing trolleys through the room, tossing panzanella (tomato and bread salads) and carving Italian-style T-bones tableside. And while I normally prefer my panzanella to be made with crusty, day-old bread rather than with hard, crunchy croutons, it's difficult to find anything truly critical to say about the salad because its heirloom tomatoes are just so incredible.

The next time I return, there are a few things I will definitely order again, in addition to the salmon crudo. I'll get the corn ravioli while corn's still in season. It's simple and perfect, sweetened with mascarpone cheese and served in browned butter flecked with sage. And I'll certainly order the grilled octopus bathed in harissa. My only wish for the dish is that the harissa tasted more like harissa, which is a North African red chile sauce

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popular in Morocco and Tunisia. But in those places, it is mind-numbingly spicy. Casanova's harissa has no heat whatsoever, just a deep paprika color and subtle, exotic taste. Still, the octopi—several bite-sized babies the size of finger puppets—are impressively tender and slightly smoky. And I will probably order the arancini (rice balls), which are lighter and more delicate than what I typically find elsewhere. Bite into one and it practically explodes with melted robiola cheese from Italy's Alpine foothills.

The porterhouse steak that's carved tableside is huge. It's not the finest prime steak in town by any stretch of the imagination, but for the price (\$49, intended for two people), it's awfully hard to beat—and the accompanying french fries are excellent, dusted with rosemary and sea salt.

When a waiter sets a plate of gnocchi on the table, I smile in anticipation. It's covered in black truffles. I take a bite. The gnocchi are wonderfully fluffy and light, just as they're always supposed to be but rarely are. But then something awful happens. The truffles have no flavor. I shoveled them into my mouth with abandon, yet... nothing. A total dud.

The duds have been few and far between, though, like when a piece of yellowtail has to be sent back to the kitchen because it's dreadfully overcooked. The only consistent misstep—and this is always a controversial subject, I realize—is the pizza. It's just not there yet. The crust, although pleasantly thin, strikes me as dull and listless. There's no life to it at all. And the cheese is globbed on with such a heavy hand that it's hard for me to taste what's underneath. The menu promises a Margherita pizza with buffalo mozzarella, and in my mind I picture a beautiful Neapolitan-style pie—bright Marzano tomato sauce, minty basil and two or three sparse orbs of soft white cheese on a thin, bubbly crust. Instead, I get an old-fashioned American-style cheese pizza with what tastes to me like very ordinary mozzarella, thick and leaden. I guess there's a market for that sort of pie. It's just not what I was hoping for. **A**