

El Dorado Kitchen caters to all seasons

IN WINTER IT'S GREAT TO sit indoors at El Dorado Kitchen, soaking in the ambience of the open kitchen, handsome dark wood floors and the basket-weave chandeliers.

But in warm weather, nothing can beat sitting under the leafy branches of the ancient fig tree on the manicured stone patio, surrounded by fences of wisteria.

The Sonoma restaurant is truly a place for all seasons. The food is orchestrated by Ryan Fancher, who cooked at the French Laundry prior before becoming El Dorado's opening chef two years ago.

When I reviewed the restaurant soon after it opened, it showed potential but seemed to be struggling. However, a recent return visit proved that the restaurant has begun to find its way.

I could become addicted to the EDK's version of mussels (\$14). Fancher steams them in a rich creme fraiche sauce studded with soft cloves of garlic, then tops them with a mound of golden fries. At first I didn't want the delicious po-

El Dorado Kitchen

405 First Street West (at West Spain), Sonoma; (707) 996-3030 or www.eldoradosonoma.com.

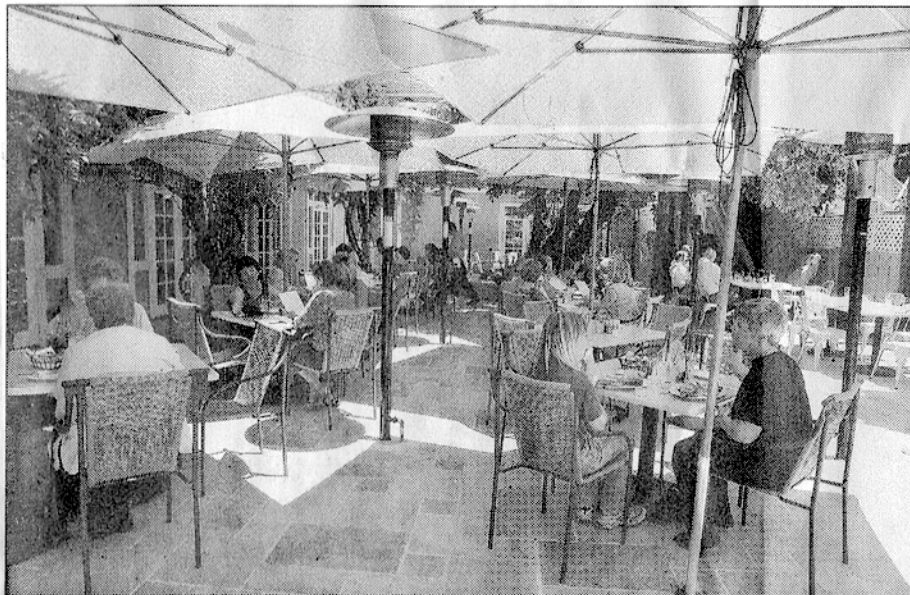
Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. daily; dinner 5:30-10 p.m. nightly. Full bar.

Reservations and credit cards accepted. Easy street parking.

Overall	★★½
Food	★★½
Service	★★
Atmosphere	★★★
Prices	\$\$\$
Noise Rating	▲▲

tatoes to become soggy so I strategically plucked the shells out from underneath so the fries wouldn't fall. However, I soon discovered that the broth-soaked fries were just as good as the crisp ones.

The fry on the potatoes was perfect, much better than it was on the fritto misto (\$11), where the mahogany coating flaked off the sticks



JOHN STOREY / The Chronicle 2005

Patio dining is popular during the summer at El Dorado Kitchen.

of zucchini, yellow squash, sun-dried tomatoes and slices of cucumber. The accompanying aioli made up for a lot, however.

Other options include a soft shell crab (\$12), house-made charcuterie (\$18) and a ratatouille empanada (\$9), a round pocket of pastry that holds all the ingredients of this now famous dish (thanks to the movie), set on a swipe of pureed argula and a delicate pile of dressed basil leaves.

Herb-roasted halibut (\$26) is a perfect summer dish, light and refreshing elevated on diced potatoes, calamari, olives, garlic and piquillo pepper. Pork osso bucco (\$25) seems a little heavy until the sun goes down, a chill nips the air

and the heat lamps glow. Even with the rich sauce, melting leeks, crisp garlic chips and cherries, the meat carried a warmed-over flavor. It was mildly disappointing, but not a deal breaker.

Dessert (all \$8) solidified EDK's place on Sonoma's must-visit restaurants. Choices include poached peaches and apricots on a disk of rich cake, surrounded by puree of the fruits, the crunch of pistachio brittle and creamy toasted almond milk granita; and two mini ice cream sandwiches — one with chocolate chip cookies and caramel ice cream, the other with oatmeal and vanilla ice cream — served with two dipping sauces.

Service has taken a sweeter turn

since my initial review. The previous indifferent staff has been replaced with a better trained, friendly crew. There are still minor glitches in picking up plates in a timely manner and delivering the wrong dish to the wrong table, but these are small.

While I have a feeling that El Dorado Kitchen still hasn't reached its potential, it's become a prime place to enjoy the bounty of Sonoma County.

Michael Bauer is The Chronicle's restaurant critic. E-mail him at mbauer@sfchronicle.com. Read his blog and visit sfgate.com/food for comprehensive Bay Area restaurant reviews and listings.

About our reviews

► **Dining Out** reviews appear in the Wednesday Food section and the Sunday Chronicle Magazine. These are the restaurant's first review, and are based on at least three visits to the restaurant. We wait until the restaurant has been open at least a month before making the first visit.

► **Updates** appear in the Wednesday Food section. These are revisits of previously reviewed restaurants, usually a couple of years after the initial review or if there has been a chef change or significant revamp of menu or design. Because we have re-viewed these restaurants before, Updates are based on one return visit.

► **Revisits** appear at sfgate.com/food. These are check-ins of previously reviewed restaurants where any changes have been minimal.

► **What's New** restaurant write-ups are not reviews, but rather to let readers know what a newly opened place serves and looks like. These generally appear on Page F2.

► Chronicle reviewers visit restaurants anonymously, and all meals are paid for by The Chronicle

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