

COMPLIMENTARY | FALL 2018

LA JOLLA

ABOUT TOWN



The Art
of Plating

Find a "Forever"
Home

Retro Fall Styles
with a Twist

Seasonal
Gift Ideas

Nashville
Rocks



THE *Art* OF PLATING

How do chefs make their dishes look so attractive?

BY WENDY LEMLIN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NOUSHIN NOURIZADEH

You're seated at your favorite restaurant. The wine shimmers in your glass like liquid rubies in the soft lighting and enticing aromas waft around you. When the server places a beautiful plate of food in front of you, every element of the dish is visually exquisite, from the colorful dots of reduction sauce to the delicate baby vegetables scattered like jewels around the fish filet garnished with tiny herb flowers. The portions may be on the small side, but the artistry of the presentation excites your appreciation of the food itself.

Now imagine the same scenario, but instead of small, artistic elements, your dish is filled with a generous serving of wine-steamed shellfish nestled into a plate-sized mound of homemade pasta with just a simple garnish of basil chiffonade. The presentation is appealing—but not fancy—and while the ingredients are obviously high quality, the portion size is sufficient to leave you feeling well-satiated.

Both of these very different plating approaches are designed to visually stimulate your excitement for the meal you are about to enjoy. In an age where every dish seems to be judged on its "Instagram-worthiness," chefs are under more

Cured wild king
salmon at The Fishery



pressure than ever to present a dish that is as attractive as it is delicious.

"Sight is the first sense that is engaged when a dish is placed before a guest," notes Bernard Guillas, executive chef of The Marine Room in La Jolla, who approaches a white plate as an artist does a canvas. His presentations are known for stylistic intricacies—such as an herb and citrus gremolata-topped Norwegian halibut on parsnip puree, surrounded by precisely placed baby vegetables, edible flowers and leaves and accented with dashes of green purslane and red lingonberry wine emulsions. "It's like going on a first date—that initial impression is so important. But, like a date, good looks will only get you so far, and there has to be substance—the food has to taste as good as it looks to turn that first date into a relationship," he adds.

The Fishery's executive chef, Paul Arias, also falls into the "food as art" school of plating. An accomplished painter, he studied culinary art as well as techniques and is a firm practitioner of what he calls the "make it pretty" philosophy. "When I'm plating, I'm also painting—there is always a bright color and contrast component, but at the same time, every element has to add to the overall tastiness of the dish." Creations like his cured wild king salmon at the North Pacific Beach restaurant epitomize that approach with vibrant colors and playful textures of criss-crossed white slivers of pickled apple topping the salmon, sharing the plate with deep red coins of pomegranate gelee and daubs of herb-green cilantro emulsion.

On the other hand, Jeff Jackson, renowned executive chef at The Lodge Torrey Pines insists that simplicity is key to elegance and everything in the dish has to be identifiable. "We are all about using the best local ingredients at their peak, and I emphasize that in my presentation. I want it to look like the food naturally landed on the plate, not



New York steak at
NINE-TEN Restaurant & Bar

contrived, no little dots of sauces or unnecessary flourishes, and that every detail of preparation has been executed perfectly to show off the main ingredient." Accenting the Confit duck leg that Chef Jackson serves at A.R. Valentien, the signature restaurant, wedges of deep red beets and a bed of fresh greens provide a pop of color against which the duck's crispy skin glistens, and pickled oyster mushrooms underscore the woody feel of fall.

At Brockton Villa in La Jolla Cove, chef Mareyja Sisbarro embraces the "less fussiness" technique. "I doubt you'll ever see me using a pair of chef's tweezers for plating," she laughs. "If anything, I might do a bold smear of some sauce or puree, but mostly I'm more about using sprigs of fresh herbs and edible flowers to bring in some extra color. For instance, in my Lobster risotto, I want the main attraction to be the big, succulent chunks of lobster. The herbal green leaves should play off of the red and white lobster pieces, adding some contrast, but not overwhelming it."

"People say I make 'pretty food,' but it's not really the first thing I think of when creating a dish," NINE-TEN Restaurant & Bar executive chef Jason Knibb remarks. "I start with the key ingredient and how it lends itself to composition, and the design almost builds itself from there. I let each element shine on its own using color and texture for elegant simplicity. Like flower arranging, a basic rule in plating is to work in odd numbers, which is more visually appealing and feels less cluttered on the plate." As with his New York steak, Knibb often uses a slate-gray, almost black, plate to add visual

New Zealand rack of lamb
with sumac yogurt at THE MED
Oceanview Restaurant



drama to the presentation of rare pink meat flanked by tawny-hued roasted sunchoke, chanterelle mushrooms and Cabernet reduction. He scatters flowers and herbs to add colorful contrast to the overall earthy tones.

Also using a dark-colored plate to show off the New Zealand rack of lamb with sumac yogurt that he features at La Jolla's THE MED Oceanview Restaurant, executive chef Alex Emery explains that his plating style is influenced by the dish itself and how the guest will eat it. For this presentation, Emery uses "negative space" around the outside of the plate to draw attention to the overall "high and tight" ingredients in the center. Wild mushrooms, crispy Brussels sprouts, green leaves and shoots and apricot fluid gel add colorful emphasis. "Yes, I consider how my dishes will shine on social media," Emery admits. "I want my food to look stunning, but at the same time, it's important that the guest can make sense of the dish, will find it easy to eat and enjoy the flavors more than the composition. It can't just be a piece of art; it must also be a deliciously enticing piece of art!"

The use of negative space as a tool for enabling a dish to visually pop is also a technique favored by chef Shahab Pourteymoor at Beaumont's Eatery in Bird Rock. Placing the main components in a smaller area of a larger plate and accenting with contrasting color garnishes draws the attention to the food. For instance, when plating his local seabass, he arranges the fish, sous vide endive and orange roasted parsnip next to a fan of pickled apple slices and a smear of sage bechamel in one area of the plate, leaving the surrounding gleaming white space to frame the culinary creation. "This also helps the dish to photograph well, which, in these days of social media obsession, is important," he adds.