

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Updated 10:43 am, Friday, September 11, 2015



Lucia keeps high standards of Marinus in looser setting

By [Michael Bauer](#)

• Photo: James Tensuan, Special To The Chronicle
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Chef Cal Stamenov, who has been in charge since the Marinus opening, makes dining at Lucia more fun.

When it opened 15 years ago, Marinus, the restaurant at Bernardus Lodge and Spa, set new standards for the Monterey area. Cal Stamenov, who has been at the helm since opening day, has been a pioneer in the region, previously working for five years at the Highlands Inn in Carmel. At Marinus, he became known for his fixed-price menus and high-level cuisine inspired by the produce grown on the 28-acre estate.

This year, the Lodge underwent a four-month renovation of the 57 guest suites and the restaurant, now named Lucia. The dining room is designed to be more casual, but it still has the expected elegance and a grand new terrace that overlooks the Santa Lucia Mountains.

While it's billed as more casual, the look is actually more modern and finished. A long bar-height communal counter visually separates the dining room and terrace from a row of banquettes with gossamer drapes in front. They can be closed for privacy, but then you lose part of the views and the bustle of the dining room.

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Stamenov continues to be inspired by the local bounty in his highly crafted presentations, but he has a looser approach that along with the interior makes dining at Lucia a lot more fun.

On a recent visit, I was impressed by how he's gently updated his food: Soft-shell crab (\$18) is served on a bed of cherry



tomatoes with chickpeas and a ham aioli; and a beautiful salad (\$16) with fava beans, artichoke hearts and Meyer lemon is dressed with a black truffle vinaigrette.

Just because the approach is more casual, it doesn't mean that the chef shies from luxury ingredients. Black truffles also show up in his ricotta agnolotti (\$16) with chanterelle mushrooms, fennel and crumbled chicken skin.

When others were giving up foie gras, he continued to serve it at Marinus. Now that it's legal, he celebrates it at Lucia with its own menu heading. Foie gras crowns the duck burger (\$38) accented with black truffle mustard; he sears a lobe and serves it with braised peaches (\$24); and he shapes it into a chilled torchon (\$22). Duck liver also shows up in other places on the menu, including as a main course in his smoked Sonoma duck cassoulet (\$37) with sausage, confit leg and cannellini beans.

On the more rustic side, he grills rabbit (\$36) and serves it with potato puree, English peas, carrots and apricot-mustard juice. He also marinates squab (\$38) in blackberries and accents the bird with melted leeks, bacon, carrots and a blackberry sauce. His locally inspired menu is yet another reason to head to Carmel Valley and bask in the warm weather, taste a few wines and enjoy the bounty of creatively prepared products.

Michael Bauer is The San Francisco Chronicle's restaurant critic and editor at large. Find his blog at <http://insidescoopsf.sfgate.com> and his reviews on www.sfchronicle.com. E-mail: mbauer@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@michaelbauer1](https://twitter.com/michaelbauer1)

Lucia Restaurant and Bar: 415 W. Carmel Valley Road, Carmel Valley. (831) 658-3400. www.bernarduslodge.com. Breakfast, lunch and dinner daily. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted.