

## French pampering

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**THERE it stood in the pretty little town of Yountville, California – The French Laundry.**

One of the world's top restaurants was there in front of us: unassuming, a small corner house, formerly a French steam press laundry. A copper sign affixed to a wall quietly announced the restaurant's presence.

We strolled down a shaded passageway and presented ourselves. Our dining guests had not arrived and there was concern on the face of the hostess: Were they OK? Our reservation was for 1pm and it was already 1.03.

1.03! A bride may show up late to her wedding but one does not show up late to The French Laundry.

We sat in the garden to wait. Two benches at different angles each held two of us. David and John studied the wine list while Philippe and I admired the roses. There were just enough trees for shade and the sunlight came dappling through.

The French Laundry is not just any restaurant. It has 65 seats that are almost impossible to book. There are two ways of doing this: One requires calling the restaurant. Most people will call and call and finally give up in frustration at the continuous busy signal. Or tables can be booked online. Good luck to you! We failed at both of these.

My friend knew Thomas Keller, the world-famous chef and owner, so we were lucky.

My friend and his guest were so late that we were shown into the dining room without them.

The central table in the downstairs room was designated for the six of us. There are two small additional rooms upstairs.

There are three choices of menu at The French Laundry: a seven-course meal, a nine-course vegetarian meal or a nine-course chef's tasting menu.

You have to be slightly nuts to spend this kind of money I thought, settling contentedly into my chair.

Because we were a special party, we weren't given a menu, but were fed a select 12-course meal. The four of us sat and napkins were dusted over our laps, champagne poured into our flutes. We toasted to highly expensive food.

A cheese puff – oh sorry, a gougere – appeared on my side plate. We'd had the same thing the night before as an amuse-bouche, but there was a difference. This one was puffier, cheesier.

A top-up on the champagne. A salmon with red onion creme fraiche cornet each.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd just like to interrupt and ask if anyone has any food allergies," said the head waiter.

At this point I realised what we were paying for: a choreographed meal. We didn't even need to open a menu. We would be fed, cared for and pampered.

Our guests Michael and Susan breezed in, slightly drunk from a champagne tasting.

For most of our 12 courses, two dishes were served to the table: every other person received the same thing. The menu glided from poelee de foie gras to sauteed Columbia river sturgeon to the signature coffee and doughnuts dessert.

The others proclaimed that the lamb cassoulet was the best thing.

I don't eat red meat and was served a yam – \$175 and I get a yam the length of my middle finger?

The yam, a perfect oval, was placed in the centre of an enormous white plate in front of me. A very nervous, gangly, young waiter appeared at my side with a diminutive wooden bowl filled with salt.

He was shaking as he sprinkled my yam, with the result that one end was a little over-salted. That was the only mistake we experienced.

He then returned to the other side of the table twice to exchange ingredients with a waiter holding a condiments tray. My diminutive tuber

was then daubed with crème fraîche and bedecked with shaved truffles. Simple. Easy. Scrumptious.

The food was exquisite. Unusual pairings, all of which worked, delicious flavours, perfect presentation. But the service was what made our visit to The French Laundry what it was.

There's a multitude of waiters, who almost fade into the decor, such is their discretion. Silverware was placed in front of us without us realising it and questions were answered without hauteur.

The meal was served with perfect timing and calm. There was one added bonus that was perfect for a table of four gay men and two straight women: every waiter was beautiful.

It was a lot of money to pay for lunch. We had two bottles of wine and our bill totalled \$1596.37. Was it worth it? I'd go back in a heartbeat.

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