



Portola Hotel's restaurant succeeds with an impressive and increasingly conscious upgrade.



EARNING STRIPES: Big comfortable booths provide a stately backdrop for carefully presented, locally sourced foodstuffs like the Heritage Ranch Berkshire pork chop.

In five years, I've eaten several times at Jacks in the Portola Hotel. This last time, I dined. Congratulations to Chef Jason Giles, who is a true prandial artist. From design to execution, choice of ingredients to preparation and presentation, he has made his mark on the Peninsula restaurant world.

The food is fresh, the portions substantial, the prices reasonable. The restaurant itself is elegant but not stuffy, appointed with intricate model ships in large glass cases and big comfortable booths with stylish lines and strong blues and magentas.

Our waitress, Cheryle, who owned her own restaurant in Pacific Grove for years but gave up the stress to serve diners at the Portola Hotel, was one of the finest I've ever enjoyed in five decades. She was fully present, knew the menu, and was patently there to make sure that we enjoyed our dining experience.

You want to know about the food. They have a broad selection of appetizers that you can enjoy at happy hour including shrimp, crab, roast beef sliders, meatballs, hummus, and other delectable treats costing only three to five dollars. There is a comfortable lounge area with a fireplace if you just want to end the day without a full meal. There is also outdoor seating with a view of Portola Plaza and a fire pit.

For dinner, you might be interested in the chef's selection, which features an appetizer, a salad, an entrée and a dessert. The items vary, but the waitress didn't seem to be ruffled by a request for substitutions. The price is \$35.

My Denise went that route, starting with perfectly cooked and thinly-breaded crispy calamari in an excellent light and piquant Serrano vinaigrette. There are three issues when it comes to good calamari – the breading is usually too heavy, the cooking often leaves too much oil, and the sauces can numb the senses. Jacks conquered each obstacle, earning honors all the way around.

Then came a Caesar salad with a fine dressing and anchovies on the side, a nice consideration. The croutons seemed an afterthought – maybe some garlic and olive oil would have given them reason.

For my starter, I opted for the spring pea soup (\$6). This is not split pea soup; think pea pod flavor. A wonderful treat, it's served with tiny bits of bacon and caramelized onions on a piece of toast atop the bowl. A unique touch.

I wanted to save room for a first-rate Heritage Ranch Berkshire pork chop (\$21) in a Dijon and lavender sauce, accompanied by wild mushrooms, potatoes whipped with sour cream, and chard impeccably prepared in a gentle sauté with a touch of garlic. The pork chop was simply excellent – thick and eye-poppingly tender, and the inventive sauce was a grand surprise. Though Jacks favors local sources of meat and produce, they get their pork from Oregon, chemical – and hormone-free.

For the main course, Denise dined on a marvelous piece of salmon. Actually there were three pieces which were seared just right, leaving the middle only a few degrees above sushi. The salmon was served over wild rice and accessorized with ratatouille. Denise is a salmon connoisseur of sorts, and expressed considerable pleasure that the fish was properly cooked, delightfully prepared and beautifully presented.

They offer a particularly appealing wine list with nicely-priced (\$6-\$11), generously-poured glasses from, as the menu reads, "some of the best of the Monterey County varietals as well as vendors [who] are committed to sustainable agriculture" including J Lohr, Hahn and Bernardus. This "green" consciousness is part of a major campaign by the owners that extends to everything from the restaurant's Swank Farms beets to the hotel's low-water laundry system to inspired community service (including beach clean-ups). Wine is also offered by the half-glass, for those who like to sample, for \$4 or \$5, and to their credit, they don't gouge on the half and full bottles.

We saved room by having them pack up half of our meals – enough food for another dinner – so that we could try the dessert which came with the chef’s selection. In this case it was a warm peach pie with drizzled raspberry and chocolate atop the crust and blueberries and strawberries around the side plus ice cream in a separate dish (actually, two dishes, as they guessed we would share it). We tried to finish it, but finally relented and brought the remainder home with the rest of the meal.

Congratulations to the Portola people. Jacks is now what it should be: a grand choice for dinner, and affordable for more often than just special occasions. It is also right for lunch. A large salad of romaine lettuce and vegetables topped with coho salmon (\$10.95) or Peter B’s Ale chicken sandwich with garlic, jack cheese, avocado and garlic aioli (\$8.25) can satisfy the palate and impress business associates and friends from out of town. They continue to offer one of the better salad bars on the Peninsula 11:30am-2pm Monday through Friday for \$11.95 (with a \$2-off locals discount) and I hear the breakfast buffet with made-to-order omelets is worthy.

And of course the location is just right to walk off your meal. You can stroll around the wharves or up the bike path past the Coast Guard station and on to Cannery Row.

Jacks is going to catch the attention of area gourmands so you might want to call ahead for reservations – especially on the big weekends at Laguna Seca or Concours. Judging from the innovative and purposeful redo that’s going on through the hotel, it seems the management knows what they are doing and won’t let success go to their head. How grand for us.

JACKS RESTAURANT Portola Hotel & Spa, 2 Portola Plaza, Monterey • 6am-2pm; 5-10pm daily. • 649-2698, <http://www.portolahotel.com>