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FOOD & WINE

RAISING THE BAR
ON HOTEL DINING

BY CAROLYN JUNG

At a time when Menlo Park has been experiencing an uptick in swanky hotel restaurants, Menlo Grill at the 35-year-old Stanford Park Hotel stood in stark contrast with its staid heavy wood furniture, bad sightlines, and afternoon sunshine that flooded in through windows, blinding patrons. Now, after a five-month closure, Menlo Grill has morphed into the more relaxed and inviting Menlo Tavern. With hotel restaurants now destinations in and of themselves, the concept pivot and interior redo wasn't so much a bid to keep up with the Joneses as it was to be relevant with newer spots like Porta Blu in the Hotel Nia, Oak and Violet at the Park James Hotel, and of course, Madera at the Rosewood Sand Hill.



"The Grill was popular in its time," says chef **Jason Dalling** about the former restaurant that lasted eight years. "But the space was not used as efficiently as it could be. We want to make it approachable, whether you're an executive from a Silicon Valley company or a local visiting us with your family." With "tavern" in the name, there is indeed greater emphasis on the bar. The restaurant, which used to be more compartmentalized, has been opened up so that the bar is a true focal point. It's not only the first thing you see when entering, but it's visible from the lobby and the patio, too. It now sports a wood bar top that will patina over time and a classic marble tile floor, along with soft flannel chairs with leather accents to provide a warmer, more rustic vibe.

The wine list includes Wine Country favorites Kosta Brown Russian River Pinot Noir and Pahlmeyer Napa Valley Chardonnay. Eight beer taps dispense local brews. Seasonal cocktails feature house-made infusions. There's the Beets Wrath, a gin-based libation colored pink by beet simple syrup that gets finished with dried beet sugar crystals, as well as the Heated Kiss, which warms up taste buds with tequila, muddled jalapeño, grapefruit juice, lime juice, jalapeño bitters and agave.

To go along with the laid-back feel is a new menu of elevated American classics, including

Dungeness crab Benedict for breakfast and weekend brunch; a fried chicken sandwich piled with spicy slaw and baby Swiss cheese for lunch; and a heritage pork chop served with drunken blackberries at dinner. Shareable plates are a big focus, with the likes of Cowgirl Creamery burrata finished with lemon olive oil and fried basil leaves to smear on wedges of country bread. The evening menu also features a "classics" section of roast chicken and meatloaf that will always be on offer. "My style of food is real and uncomplicated," says Dalling, who cooked at various Fairmont resorts in his native Canada before crossing the border to be executive chef at the Fairmont Washington, D.C. "There are no foams or any strange science projects going on."

In a nod to the world-class university across the road, the dining room's floor has been refinished with mosaic tiles that sport the names of the original Stanford Eating Clubs. Founded in 1892, these once all-male clubs offered a social

alternative to fraternities and a different dining option from what was offered by the university. Because they were also known as Toyon Eating Clubs, the restaurant's semiprivate dining area has been rechristened the Toyon Room. The

patio, which boasts two fire pits, has been upgraded with three cantilevered umbrellas to shade communal tables, and a pergola with a 10-seat table for private dining. A new 15-speaker sound system was added. Live music will be offered May through October.

The Grill was always a quasi-home away from home for locals. With the advent of the Tavern, the hotel hopes to keep regulars happy but also be a major draw for the tech crowd. In fact, in a rare

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move for an area that's known to turn in early, the Tavern, just like its predecessor the Grill, continues to serve food until midnight. Should a group of patrons end up drawing up plans for the next Google on a cocktail napkin in the wee hours, Dalling would be beside himself: "I think that would be absolutely fantastic."