

RESTAURANTS

Dining on the Golden Dream

Chez Noir serves up optimistic, inventive fare that actualizes the California coast's plentiful promise.

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FOLLOWING THE GREAT San Francisco earthquake of 1906, displaced artists and literati, including Langston Hughes, Alice McGowan, Jack London, and Sinclair Lewis, sought refuge in the calm of Carmel-by-the-Sea's artist community, about 120 miles down the California Coast. Today, fairy-tale cottages with rolled eaves and hobbit-like round doors from that era pepper Carmel, joined by modern glass mansions and seminal architectural works, such as Frank Lloyd Wright's Mrs. Clinton Walker House, Francis Wynkoop's Butterfly House, and the D.L. James House by Arts and Crafts pioneer Charles Sumner Greene. Homes here have names instead of street addresses and residents must go to the post office to collect their mail. Other eccentricities further attest to the town's original character: a long-standing ice cream ban wasn't lifted until Clint Eastwood's stint as mayor in the '80s, and high heels remain illegal due to cobblestone walkways and a lack of streetlights. A print-only newspaper dedicates a weekly column to a local dog, complete with the animal's portrait taken on the town's mile-long beach. Carmel still exists in a world of its own creation.

Perhaps that's why the pandemic triggered another creative migration to this semi-remote haven, infusing it with a new generation of inhabitants with big ideas, including Chef Jonny Black and his wife and business partner Monique. Following residencies at renowned American restaurants ranging from Atelier Crenn and Quince in San Francisco to Per Se in New York City, Black and Monique moved to Carmel. It was here that they opened Chez Noir in October 2022, in a craftsman house, where they also live (upstairs) with their children. Ten months later, the self-described "elevated, community-driven restaurant rooted in California coastal cuisine" became one of only six establishments in the state awarded a 2023 Michelin star, joining Carmel's only other Michelin-starred restaurant, Aubergine, in cultivating the town's growing culinary reputation.



Chez Noir's menus highlight local produce and seafood as well as seasonal cocktails.

The Blacks met while working in restaurants and knew they wanted to open their own. Jonny's year as executive chef at Sierra Mar at [Post Ranch Inn](#) in Big Sur just before the pandemic made them certain the Monterey Peninsula was the right home for their venture. "All the connections I've had during my career in the Bay Area really apply down here," the chef confirms. "I still work with the same farmers I've had relationships with for a long time. Carmel is a great community for restaurants. People visit for a few days, and they'll stay at [Carmel Beach Hotel](#) and eat at Aubergine. And the next night, they'll come eat at Chez Noir, then go for breakfast around the corner at [Stationæry](#)."

Accordingly, Jonny's offerings evolve nearly daily to highlight the local, seasonal produce and seafood from the Central Coast's waters, including Monterey Bay. And as is evident on Chez Noir's menu — through tiny Matisse-like cutouts of a hand, picking ingredients from the mountains and the sea — the chef conscientiously selects what gets layered into every dish, creating a veritable landscape of textures and flavors.

Stepping into Chez Noir feels akin to visiting my favorite friend's home for a dinner party. You know, the fun friends. The ones with the best taste. The ones you always feel good around. The ones whose food is always fantastic. "That warmth starts with the lighting," explains Monique. "It's like that Keith McNally quote: 'There's no such thing as an ugly person, only bad lighting.'" It's true that the 36-seat dining room's sumptuous, buttery glow enhances every complexion in it, but there is far more than good lighting going on.

Jonny and Monique love feeding people, and part of the fun is relieving guests from decision-making by offering four- and five-course prix fixe menus. Starter snacks, including fresh Monterey Bay spot prawns and chilled oysters glisten alongside seasonal cocktails created by bar manager Ashley Havens. Glass bread



Chef Jonny Black and his wife and business partner, Monique, opened Chez Noir in Carmel, where they also live.

layered with vanilla bean aioli, lipstick peppers, tuna belly, and shiso makes our mouths tingle with its contrasting crunchy, creamy textures. A dry-aged New York strip steak grilled over charcoal is flavored with a Daube Provençal of tomato, olive, anchovy, clove, cinnamon, parsley, and oregano and served with smoked eggplant and tetra squash glazed with a basil pistou. Smoked Wild King salmon is dry brined, lightly smoked in a Mibrasa oven over applewood and placed over Swank Farms peas, Bloomsdale spinach, and a beurre blanc sauce mixed with cured and smoked fresh salmon roe and pickled onion blossoms. By the end of the meal, our plates are empty, save for a pool of sage butter where handmade artichoke porcini ravioli once rested. We soak up the remaining drops with the last pinches of Jonny's signature brioche. Every inch of our table that isn't covered with a plate is dotted with stemware containing the ultimate sips of (primarily Californian) wine pairings.

A few months later, tantalized by my memory of Jonny's abalone skewers, placed on a delicate bay laurel branch and served in the invertebrate's iridescent home, I drive the five hours from my home in Los Angeles back to Chez Noir. This time, I dine alone in the restaurant's first-come, first-served four-seat

bar, a cozy emerald nook with a pearlescent oyster shell ceiling, where I order à la carte from the evening's prix fixe menu, savoring every bite, and, once again, lingering as long as I like. ●

The one-square-mile town of Carmel sits at the tip of California's Monterey Peninsula, right where Highway 1 winds south to Big Sur along the Amalfi-like coastline. In proximity to three major airports (Monterey Regional, San José Mineta International, and San Francisco International), it's a must on any coastal California road trip, with something for the foodie, the golf-obsessed, the nature lover, the car fanatic, and the shopper alike.

Where to Stay

With over 1,000 hotel rooms in Carmel, there's no shortage of options, from luxury resorts to a smattering of midcentury motels tucked between the downtown shops. For a private, pied-à-terre escape, check into the just-opened [Carmel Beach Hotel](#), 100 steps from the sand. Staying at the 26-room sister property to the luxury boutique inn [LAuberge Carmel](#) is like having access to a private club, with a spa, fitness studio, e-bikes, and a guest-only restaurant overseen by award-winning [Aubergine](#) executive chef Justin Cogley.

Where to Eat

Stationær

Stationary designer [Alissa Bell](#) and her husband Anthony Carnazzo, a chef, grew up around Carmel and returned there during the pandemic to raise their young family and open the local culinary favorite Stationær in 2020. Your best bet for a casual breakfast, try the chilaquiles or stop at their takeaway wine and food shop to outfit the perfect beach picnic.

Aubergine

Chef Justin Cogley is a secret weapon. The former professional ice skater-turned-triathlete, marathoner (he's run the 115 km Madeira Island Ultra Trail race twice), with an obsessive Japanese ceramics collection, is also Michelin-starred Aubergine's executive chef. His eight-course tasting menu is meticulously constructed and artfully presented (on said ceramics collection); experiencing the textures and flavors of his food is otherworldly. As if you need another reason to dine there, lead sommelier John Haffey was named California's best sommelier by Michelin in 2023.

Where to Shop

Malbon Golf

Imagine if a bunch of skaters and artists put a fresh, playful, and slightly subversive twist on golf apparel. Erica and Stephen Malbon have turned out a hard-hitting brand that has slapped some streetwear-inspired cool onto the course. Their women's collection debuted in July 2023 during the first women's USGA championships ever played at nearby Pebble Beach.

San Carlos Square between 5th and 6th, unit 2, Carmel-by-the-Sea

Somewhere

A creatively curated, cozy-luxe California lifestyle shop. Go for their beautiful selection of modern letterpress cards, small-run artist and children's books, one-of-a-kind surf-inspired ceramics, craft kits, and colorful deluxe pet accessories.

San Carlos between Ocean and 7th Ave, Carmel-by-the-Sea

Foxy Couture Carmel

Susan Galvin's curation of vintage couture will delight any fashion lover. A museum-like collection of nostalgia-inducing Y2K gems including a gold Alexander McQueen Knuckle Clutch and a jaw-dropping selection of Chanel, some of which appeared in the recent "Barbie" movie.

San Carlos Street, 2 SW of 5th Ave, Carmel-by-the-Sea

Tejido Collective

Since 2012, Shanti Rackley and co-owner Taira Hustedt have curated a collection of the softest alpaca sweaters, scarves, and apparel, all handcrafted and sustainably produced by master craftspeople and Indigenous communities in Peru. Their shop also features beautiful artist-made home goods, small-batch apothecary products, and accessories.

Mission Street between 5th and 6th, Carmel-by-the-Sea

What to Do

Point Lobos State Natural Reserve

Known as “the crown jewel of the California State Park System,” Point Lobos State Natural Reserve is breathtaking. Hike along the Whalers Cove trail, which winds through the Jurassic Park–like forest. Pine-scented fog envelops the cliffs where waves crash and fill the aquamarine coves below.

Monterey Bay Aquarium

Experience the world-renowned Monterey Bay Aquarium to explore one of the deepest and most biodiverse ocean canyons in the world. Monterey Bay plunges 2.5 miles below the surface at its deepest point, twice the depth of the Grand Canyon. Their newest exhibit, “Into the Deep,” features the largest collection of deep-sea animals in North America, including transparent glowing jellies, urchins, and more.

Our Contributors

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