



SMALL PLATES



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

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



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

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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 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.●

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, Jonny 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.

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

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