

# food for thought

Food with Flowers, Handcrafted Italian Delights and Great Grog

BY LARRY HARLAND



Photo: Kelli Utgail

**Chef Michael Kimmel, with gardener Juan Aquino, uses fresh herbs, veggies and flowers from the garden behind Tarp's Roadhouse. The restaurant remodeled to celebrate its 20th anniversary, with improvements such as a modern bar, new cocktails and menu tweaks.**

## TARPY'S FACELIFT AND TASTELIFT

■ For two decades, Tarp's Roadhouse in Monterey has been known for its cool comfort food, power lunches, expert service and a colorful, floral accent placed on every plate that leaves the kitchen.

When hired 20 years ago, Chef Michael Kimmel went to work on the hillside behind the historic building, creating a terraced garden that produced some veggies and thousands of edible flowers such as nasturtiums, geraniums, pansies and roses.

"First we eat with our eyes," Kimmel says.

With the help of grower guru Mark Marino, Kimmel has expanded the garden-to-table concept. Now you'll see a sprig of fresh thyme in

one of the new craft cocktails, some chopped Russian black kale in a dinner salad, and enjoy the perfume of rosemary in the lamb tenderloin.

It's all part of a spate of recent changes to help freshen the restaurant's concept during its 20th anniversary.

Like its sister restaurants, Rio Grill and Montrio Bistro, Tarp's celebrated its milestone with a lesson in self-improvement. It closed its doors for a week in October to tweak the overall experience. That workweek brought paint and polish, a modern back-bar (with an inspired new cocktail menu and a hip happy hour), new tables and a lighter, leaner menu.

Diners can expect their old favorites, and that telltale Tarp's service that's set the standard for

two decades. And you'll still find that flower on your plate, a present from the chef with the greenest thumb in the county.

## TRUE ITALIAN FOOD ARTISTS

■ Misuse of the word "artisan" has polluted its meaning.

The word—which means handcrafted—has become a marketer's tedious tool (think Domino's Artisan Pizza).

Local restaurant menus reveal artisan cheeses, artisan bread, and artisan sandwiches. Consumers buy into this imagery, but merely adding whole grain to bread doesn't make it artisan (and aren't all sandwiches handmade?)

"I consider myself an artisan, even though that word has become a catch phrase," says Jason



Balestrieri, executive chef and partner at Cantinetta Luca, Salumeria Luca and 400° in Carmel. The flagship is Cantinetta Luca, where six years ago, Balestrieri helped launch the uptown Italian trattoria.

Last year, Balestrieri and owner David Fink expanded into the adjacent storefront, opening Salumeria Luca to showcase hard-to-find Italian food products to complement prepped-to-go sauces, desserts, house-pulled mozzarella and fresh ricotta.

Luca bakes its own bread in the restaurant's four-deck oven, and all the foccacia, boule, stirato, filone (and those addictive, pencil-thin breadsticks called grissini) are sold next door, along with semolina-rosemary cookies and biscotti.

At Luca, Balestrieri and his crew take advantage of expensive meat grinders, pasta extruders and dough sheeters, creating everything by hand, including sausage and pancetta. Balestrieri makes his own salumi for the restaurant, but government regulations prevent him from selling it over the counter. That sticky red tape doesn't prevent him from reaching out to his contacts—real artisans—in Italy, New York and San Francisco to round out his window case (notice the four prosciuttos and an impressive, 70-pound log of mor-

tadella). And an \$18,000 Italian-made machine spins seven kinds of gelato and sorbet.

"I enjoy being in the thick of it, making something from scratch," Balestrieri says. "There's a reason it's called 'labor of love.' It's a lot of work, but in the end it's worth it."

### SPECIAL SUDS IN MOCO

■ We all know this is wine-sipping country, but beer is closing the popularity gap thanks to a handful of local brewers.

It starts with Kevin Clark, the young brewmaster at Peter B's inside Portola Hotel and Spa in Monterey. Clark runs Monterey's only craft brewery with zeal, coming up with wildly creative suds.

He uses hops grown by students at Rancho Cielo youth campus, he makes his coffee stout using Acme Coffee's black brew, he incorporates golden raisins into his Belgium ale and has launched a novel experiment that ages beer in old chardonnay barrels.

Don't forget the Carmel Valley Brewing duo of Dean Hatfield and Karolyn Stone, whose premium pale ale is a big local hit. In a novel twist, all of CVB's leftover brewer's yeast goes to Salinas resident Jeff Durbin, who turns the throwaway byproduct into a crunchy cracker he calls Beer Bark: order at [www.eco-deli.com](http://www.eco-deli.com).



Photo courtesy of Cantinetta Luca

Carmel restaurant Cantinetta Luca has expanded next door to open Salumeria Luca, which offers traditional Italian foods such as fresh cheeses, meats, breads, pastas, desserts and gelato.



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