

The French Laundry

The French Laundry lives up to its rating and reputation as the best restaurant in the Americas and one of the finest in the world.

My guests and I were in awe throughout the two dinners we were so fortunate to experience recently. The service at the French Laundry is formal and personable, a rare combination. Regardless of a patron's knowledge of food and wine, the personnel are always gracious and never stuffy or intimidating when explaining how dishes are prepared or making recommendations to guests.

Walking to the front door of the restaurant meant strolling through a well-maintained courtyard of herbs and other edible plants. Once inside, service staff, composed of two hostesses, a manager and other greeters, welcomed us and offered to take our coats. One of the hostesses led us to our table, while another staffer followed our party to pull out our chairs before we sat.

The table was set with linen napkins and silverware. We had the honor of removing the old-style clothespins from our napkins while the hostess walked around handing the menus to the ladies and then to the gentlemen.

During the first visit, I left my glasses at a nearby bed and breakfast. Kevin, our waiter, immediately excused himself and returned with a linen-lined silver tray containing three pairs of reading glasses with different prescriptions.

New settings of appropriate utensils were placed before every guest for each of the nine courses. The servers, all in well-tailored suits, timed the placement of the dishes perfectly so that the ladies at the table were served first and at exactly the same time, followed by the serving of the gentlemen. Never did I hear a clattering of dishes.

The French Laundry has a knowledgeable sommelier who recommended excellent pairings of wine for the different meals from the restaurant's wonderful wine list. During the first evening, our sommelier selected four half-bottles to ensure we shared the appropriate wines for our respective courses, as no single wine could pair with the nine-course meal.

There was always a manager or a waiter standing and observing the dining rooms. Service personnel communicated by eye contact, so we rarely heard any instructions to the staff. Because several staff attended to each table during the course changes, the overall effect was like watching a well-choreographed ballet.

6640 WASHINGTON ST.

YOUNTVILLE

707.944.2380
frenchlaundry.com

lunch | Fri thru Sun
dinner | Mon thru Sun

+20% TIP

Guests unwittingly became part of the ballet when accessing the second floor. Staff, positioned at the top and bottom of the stairs, ensured that waiters quietly stood behind them to allow the guests to proceed.

One of my guests, a local chef, was astonished by how the staff honored Chef Thomas Keller and each of his creations. With subdued flair, a salad of matsutake mushrooms was presented in a bowl nestled in a liner rimmed with sprigs of pine. After the dish

was placed in front of the guest, the staff finished the presentation by slowly pouring hot water onto the sprigs — all the while quietly describing the components of the salad and enhancing the gastronomic experience. Every course of each meal was just as elegantly presented and described.

Chef Keller gets it: Guests come to his restaurant for the food — but his insistence on impeccable service has them remembering their experience and wanting to return.



Elegant presentation and old-style table settings at the French Laundry, where service is both formal and personable.



TIPPING GUIDE

0% = No Service, 5% = Inadequate Service, 10% = Barely Adequate Service, 15% = Good Service, 20% = Outstanding Service

Our reviewer, who will remain anonymous, has more than 25 years of experience as a waiter, owner, manager, maître d' and sommelier. He was trained in a four-star restaurant in upstate New York and has helped open four successful restaurants in Napa and Sacramento.