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### Nine-Ten Restaurant at the Grande Colonial Hotel

910 Prospect St.  
La Jolla, CA  
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I dip my spoon into the soup. It's as smooth as cream, the flavor a beguiling, subtly sweet puree of fennel and bell peppers, the whole effect as delicate as handmade lace. A salad of pears and Julian apples (from the rustic mountain town east of San Diego) is just delicious, the sharp crunch of the fruit embellished with sugar-glazed almonds and pearl-sized nubbles of fresh goat cheese. The greens in it are feathery wisps so fresh they taste as if they were picked moments before.

It's not only me. Everyone at my table is equally entranced with their first courses. I'm thinking that, despite the unfortunate name, Nine-Ten would be a real find whether it was in L.A. or here in northern San Diego County. I'm glad now I made the effort to drive all the way to La Jolla on the basis of a friend's tip.

Nine-Ten doesn't feel much like a hotel restaurant, and that's a good thing. In fact, I keep forgetting that it's even part of the Grande Colonial hotel. Outside, the existence of the restaurant is signaled by a clutch of sidewalk tables. Inside, the long, narrow dining room is casual and comfortable, more bistro than formal restaurant. Panels of abstract paintings mounted above the banquettes add a jolt of color, and a shelf of bulbous ceramic sculptures of vegetables teetering on shapely silver legs injects some whimsy into the otherwise sober room.

The minute our waiter hands us the menu, I sit up straighter. It's small, just one page, listing a handful of appetizers, a handful of entrées, most of them offered in two sizes -- "tasting" or entrée. The beauty is that the latter is exactly two times the price of the former. Or, to look at it another way, the "tastings" are half the size of the entrées. This way you can order two appetizers and stop there. Or, if more than one entrée piques your interest, you can order half-portions of two main courses, our waiter explains.

We all like the idea. A lot. And the fact that the wine list offers a particularly broad selection of half-bottles fits in well with the concept. It's not a problem if your party is four or more, but if you're just two, you're usually stuck with drinking the same wine through both courses. Here a twosome has the possibility of choosing a different wine to go with each course of a three-course menu.

The staff is so enthusiastic, it's easy to fall into the spirit of things. One night six of us pounce on the menu, ordering up various combinations of just about every dish available that night. We share, or at least taste, what everybody else has on their plate. For the two couples who don't know each other, it's an ideal icebreaker. Not to mention fun.

Nine-Ten's chef is 29-year-old Michael Stebner, an American with a penchant for French food and technique to burn. He cures and smokes his own delicious salmon. Its subtly smoky, salty-sweet taste goes beautifully with a pretty salad of arugula, radishes and green beans. And he's shrewd enough to pair seared foie gras with apples and beets instead of something cloyingly sweet, the better to taste the melting sweet fat of the liver.

Steamed mussels are uncommonly good here. They're the variety called bouchots, tender and sweet and modest in size, served in their glossy black shells with their mingled juices and a bright note of lemon. The garnish is half a lemon and a bay leaf. Stebner clearly has an eye for the simple and the beautiful.

Right now, when Nantucket scallops are in season, Stebner gives these delicate mollusks -- scarcely bigger than a pencil eraser - a slight Sicilian spin. They're sautéed with tiny dice of bacon, an occasional raisin, a few whole almonds and, for color, green spirals of the beautiful variety of broccoli called *romanesco*.

Stebner's cooking leans more toward seafood than easier, and mostly less interesting, meat. On one visit, he listed cod on the night's menu. Why not? The incredibly fresh fish was seared on just one side, bathed in lightly smoky bacon juices and strewn with halved Brussels sprouts and miniature cauliflower florets so perfect they could have come from the garden of Eden. (Well, they're from the next closest thing, the famed Chino Farm in nearby Rancho Santa Fe.)

Though fish is clearly his preference, this young chef doesn't shy away from meat. The server will inform you that Stebner writes a new menu every day; in fact, sometimes only a few dishes change, and one regular seems to be flatiron steak, a satisfying, chewy cut grilled rare and served in a red wine sauce with sautéed greens and pickled onions. Another is meaty and tender braised beef short ribs served with a delightful medley of carrots, parsnips and an occasional chestnut.

And for a side, if Good Faith Organics braising greens are on the menu, that's all you need to know. The mustard and other pungent greens, braised in olive oil with olives, garlic and Parmigiano, are good enough to consider turning vegetarian and having a double order for dinner.

A couple of dishes are less successful. The bland poussin (baby chicken) isn't that compelling, especially in light of the other choices. It reminds me of something the doctor would prescribe -- with plenty of vegetables, too: Romano beans, fingerling potatoes, braised leeks. And a rich, butter-suffused lobster risotto is done in by a powerful dose of truffle oil. It would be far better without it.

By my last visit, the real thing -- white truffles -- had arrived from Italy, and Nine-Ten had begun offering several à la carte dishes with truffle shaved over, as well as a four-course truffle menu at \$125 a person that included both white and black truffles. The staff is running it as an event. Tables all around us are ordering truffle dishes left and right.

The truffles were good, but not great, most likely because they were a few days too old. Personally, I'd rather have a lot of truffle on one dish than a little truffle on several. Truffles are meant to be extravagant, celebratory, and they work best on something

simple and warm, such as *tagliarini*, coddled eggs or *agnolotti*. That night gnocchi was the best choice.

Although the truffle menu as a whole is disappointing, one dish stands out: a glorious *bollito misto* (mixed boiled meats) of veal shank, pork belly, duck leg and beef short ribs perfumed with some French black truffle. I'd come back to eat this again, truffles or no truffles.

For a small hotel restaurant, the wine list is exceptionally well-chosen, by sommelier Sean Marron, albeit handicapped by typically high hotel markups. Though there are few bargains on this list, several outstanding undervalued wines can be found, such as the 2001 Castle Rock Pinot Noir for \$26.

Pastry chef Jack Fisher is a talent too. He'll lace a fragile, shivery *panna cotta* infused with fennel seed and set it beside some shaved fennel, citrus segments and a bracing green apple sorbet. A buttery *financier* studded with dried cherries resembles a muffin that's gone to finishing school and met up with a spunky cardamom gelato. Individual spiced pumpkin tarts come with divine homemade marshmallows, but the killer dessert is his "half-cooked chocolate cake," a bowl of molten chocolate black as tar buried beneath an onslaught of caramel sauce and cream.

With its ingenious market menu, careful attention to ingredients and Michael Stebner's intelligent, sensual cooking, Nine-Ten may be the year's most serendipitous discovery. The fact that it's in La Jolla makes it all the sweeter.

—S. Irene Virbila  
Times Restaurant Critic  
Dec. 11, 2002

**Hours:** Breakfast, lunch & dinner served daily.

### Venue Details

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| <b>Cuisine</b>     | California   |
| <b>Rating</b>      | ★★★  |
| <b>Ambience</b>    | A smart American bistro, with sidewalk tables out front and interesting art on the walls.  |
| <b>Best dishes</b> | (Menu changes daily) Julian apple and pear salad, house-smoked salmon, Nantucket bay scallops, flatiron steak, braising greens, fennel seed <i>panna cotta</i> , dried cherry <i>financier</i> , half-cooked chocolate cake. |
| <b>Best table</b>  | One on the sidewalk out front.   |
| <b>Prices</b>      | Appetizers, \$6 to \$15; main courses, \$13 to \$30; desserts, \$7 to \$9.   |
| <b>Service</b>     | Enthusiastic and competent.  |
| <b>Wine list</b>   | Wide-ranging and eclectic, with a large selection of half-bottles, but with typically high hotel markups. Corkage, \$20 minimum, or half the price of any wines included on the list.  |