



## [Restaurant Review |](#)

### Wholly Trinities

By [Naomi Wise](#) | Published Thursday, Sept. 29, 2005

#### [Nine-Ten](#)

910 Prospect Street, San Diego, 858-964-5400

California cuisine as it's often cooked in San Diego can be a big bore, with featureless combinations and all-too-familiar fusiony flavorings. I was bored last week (last month, last year) -- but I wasn't bored for one moment during a recent dinner at Nine-Ten. Plate after plate, I thought I'd been whisked off to San Francisco, New York, or foodie heaven. It's not just that the dishes were delicious and the ingredients fresh and fine. It was also the joy of encountering daring, modern ideas and the courage to put them on the plate.

The restaurant has always been more than good, but recent changes have made it better. When opening chef Michael Stebner departed to open Region, he took dessert chef Jack Fisher and about half of Nine-Ten's waitstaff with him. Executive Chef Jason Knibb, a protégé of Trey Foshee of George's at the Cove, replaced Stebner in September '03. Last February, I enjoyed a tasty meal of his cooking, but the service had degenerated into frenzied idiocy. Since then, the restaurant has turned around. Jack Fisher returned to Nine-Ten to work with Knibb, and the collaboration has sparked some extraordinary cooking. As always, the kitchen emphasizes seasonal dishes, highlighting local small-farm produce (sustainably raised or organic), wild seafood, and mainly natural meats, but now the preparations are growing more adventurous.

The decor still has the same bistro styling, with lots of dark wood, recessed lighting, small tables, and unfortunate acoustics. "I can hear that table over there better than I hear you," my partner told me. A woman at "that table" promptly twisted around to look at him. But the restaurant has a brand-new manager of the front of the house, and servers who are not only better trained, but bright and observant enough to genuinely enhance your meal.

The human mind loves the number three, and here, the menu accommodates; it's divided into a trinity (plus a later sheet of desserts and cheeses). The "first course" section offers one soup and many salads. Don't skip this section because the dishes look light -- the flavors are bigger than you'd imagine. "Second course" has small plates that can be either substantial appetizers or mini-mains. The triad concludes with "entrées."

With posse-mates Dave and Marty joining us, we began with a salad of house-cured salami and fresh figs. The thin rounds of salami barely resembled commercial products. "Fatty, not too spicy. Meaty, but delicate," said Dave, a connoisseur of New York deli. The meat was matched with luscious raw local figs touched with white truffle honey, an entrancing combination of sweetness and faint funkiness. This, and most other plates, presented a trinity of central flavors: Part three of this salad's story consisted of baby arugula sprinkled with nutty-sweet shaved Parmesan, which brought the other ingredients into sharp focus.

The idea for a Chino Farms heirloom tomato salad spins off the familiar Italian *insalata caprese*, but it's done here the way it ought to be -- and then some. The tomatoes were ripe and bursting with shades of tomato personality, from earthy-tart to sugary, from firm to pillowy. The mozzarella, which Fisher makes in-house, was velvet. The accompaniments included shaved torpedo (white) onions, pine nuts, and mysterious garnet-color dice. Dave initially mistook them for beets. "No, they're soft! Ethereal! I've never tasted anything like this!" Marty said. Nobody at the table could guess their real identity. They turned out to be cubes of "balsamic jelly" -- think grown-up Jell-O, not sweet and fake-tasting, but sweet-tart and genuine, while less stiff than any gelatin product: They're thickened with pectin instead, so they're stable at room temperature but melt in your mouth. (Fisher created the jellies, Knibb decided to include them in this salad.) The dressing was a white balsamic vinaigrette, and it was perfect.

The "seasonal soup" du jour was a cream-free "cream" of wild mushroom, a thick purée of portobellos and dried porcini touched by several members of the onion family and diffused with vegetable stock. It tasted like "essence of forest," driven wilder yet by a hint of white truffle oil.

Our second course choices added triumph to triumph. Harissa-marinated Mexican white shrimp had absorbed a dusting of semi-hot paprika, coarse-ground black pepper, and other subtle spices. Alongside were watermelon batons and puffs of feta cheese, with a lemon-feta vinaigrette. The trick is: bite into all three at once. The watermelon and the shrimp love each other; surprisingly, so do the watermelon and cheese. This is one joyous *ménage à trois*.

Poached Maine lobster vaulted even higher on the scale of delight -- and we were already hitting clouds. Trembling-soft lobster meat sat next to a cylinder of delicate corn custard, the texture of the lightest *panna cotta*. A ragout of leeks was as silky as perfectly poached baby spinach, but with a mild onion flavor. Again, three flavors were in exquisite partnership. "This is the best lobster I've tasted in my whole life," raved Marty. "I have to agree," said my partner. Everyone was getting a little swoony, and I include myself.

It's hard to top great appetizers -- especially that lobster -- but entrées (the menu's third leg) weren't a letdown. A Tasmanian sea trout was prepared with all the panache of the big name chefs of New York or Chicago. This is a warm-water salmon trout with flavorful dark-orange flesh -- milder than Alaskan salmon, stronger than freshwater trout. The skin, crisped to crackling, was served separately from the meat, like the skin of a Peking duck in a serious Chinese restaurant, the better to savor the texture. The fish-flesh was moist. The accompaniments were a leap forward for San Diego. There were slender green beans and tiny swirls of mild dark greenery that highlighted the trace of natural sugar in the beans -- and a wee bit of stone-ground polenta from the South's celebrated Anson Mills, with a touch of oniony sauce not mentioned on the menu. (I learned later that it's artichoke cooking water, reduced with shallots and swirled with butter.)

Perhaps you've read about "foams" in your cooking magazines or the *New York Times*, and wondered: what's a foam, and why? It's an airy emulsion, a tickle of a flavor, an overtone, like a seasoning captured in champagne bubbles. The technique was pioneered at a famous Spanish restaurant called El Bulli and is now rife in restaurants in the "foodie" cities of the U.S. Well, the trout came with almond foam, a pouf of

bittersweet almond essence, decorated with a few slices of the nut. It wasn't put there merely to show off the chef's skill -- it was right for the dish. Maybe Manhattanites can take foams and flawless flavor matchups for granted. In San Diego, we're not yet so privileged.

Maine diver scallops were big, juicy, and clean-flavored, skillet-marked but pearly-pink inside, dressed in brown-butter vinaigrette. They had a bittersweet surface glaze and marked their passage with a hint of white pepper's scorchy aftertaste. They came with tiny chanterelles and flat "pole beans" (resembling Romano beans) that were so fresh and sweet they fooled my mouth into taking them for sugar snap peas. Chino Farms corn rode alongside in a turmeric-flavored *coulis* (rough purée).

The sole dish that didn't knock us out was our fault, and the steer's -- not the chef's. A dry-aged pedigreed New York strip steak resembled ahi tuna or filet mignon, soft, tender, but too mild in flavor. We should have gone for the flatiron steak -- with garlic custard! -- instead. Our meat could have used a sprinkle more salt, but we loved the accompaniments of a red-wine reduction, buttery Yukon Gold potato purée (tasting as sweet as butternut squash) and grilled vegetables. "I hate okra," said Dave, spearing another piece of it, "but this okra is okay."

We skipped a cheese course to head straight for Fisher's bold desserts, ordering four of them for four of us, compared to our usual grudging two-for-four. Sweet corn cake resembled an oversized grainy, southern-style corn muffin with honey undertones, served warm with candied peaches, blueberry sauce, and Chino Farms corn ice cream. Corn ice cream? Lordy, yes! My gang agreed that the combination was brilliant.

Fig Napoleon is risky fun, a great dish if your taste (like mine) runs to barely sweet desserts. Layers of house-made orange-flavored ricotta were separated by crisp, cracker-like pastry layers that reminded me of Indian *pappadam*. A scoop of rosemary-buttermilk sherbet sat atop a thicker cracker-cookie. The rosemary was elusive, a tiny lash of herbal bitterness under the sweetness.

A square of crème fraîche *panna cotta*, a bit on the firm (flan-like) side, was islanded in a lagoon of light melon soup. The innocent sensuality of the combination reminded me of Lolita (in the book, not the movie), an angel-faced 13-year old snapping her gum, with no clue that she's a little hottie. We also enjoyed a peach tarte tatin, with pine nut brittle and mascarpone gelato. Nothing too revolutionary there, just plenty of charm.

Our waitress knew the waiting game (although in her real life she's headed for med school). She proved the opposite of the "dumb blonde" who'd served us so ineptly last winter. Chelsea, from Mandeville, Louisiana, had obviously tasted her way through the menu and sipped from the wine list. Better yet, she read our table right by our choice of dishes and our pleasure in eating them. She offered us a sample of the new-to-the-list Castelnau du Chateau Suiduiraut dessert wine (\$13 a glass), knowing that we'd appreciate it. Seduced by the sip, we ordered a glass to share around. Sauternes wines are so sweetly intense, it doesn't take much to enjoy their quality -- they're liquid gold. This one capped off a superb meal with a final taste of paradise.

## ABOUT THE CHEFS

Born in Montego Bay, Jamaica, and raised in Southern California, Jason Knibb got his training on the job. "I got into cooking by accident. My first job was bussing tables at a restaurant in Playa Del Rey. I was into surfing and didn't show up one day. I got fired. My neighbor was the executive chef, and he talked me into coming back and working in the kitchen, something I might like -- it's more fast-paced. I went back there and...it was fun. I was inspired by the guys in the kitchen -- they were having fun. From there, it just took

off. I had another neighbor who was an expediter for Wolfgang Puck at Eureka Restaurant in L.A. He told me, 'If you're really serious about cooking, you should try and get a job there.' I took him up on it...and I got a job making pizzas and salads. It was a big eye-opener, the amount of creativity, the passion you saw in Wolfgang. It was overwhelming, in a positive way."

He subsequently worked for Roy Yamaguchi at Roy's Kahana Bar & Grill in Maui, for Hans Rockenwagner at Rockenwagner's in Santa Monica, and Rox restaurant in Beverly Hills. After stints at restaurants in San Francisco, Warsaw, Poland, and Venice, California, he moved to Sundance, Utah, to work under La Jolla's own Trey Foshee at the famed Sundance Resort. He took over as the resort's executive chef when Foshee departed. "I was there for about five years. But I had a newborn son, and I wanted to get back to the coast, because Utah was at a standstill in cuisine. I wanted to get back into the game." Trey taught him much about what should go on the plates: "You let the products speak for themselves. That was something I picked up from working with him."

I asked him how he got away with doing original, creative cooking in San Diego, when so many chefs here feel that patrons won't let them take chances. "I've heard that, too," he said. "I think it's a matter of being who you are and doing what you want. You just have to do it. Over time, they start to trust you and trust your food. You have to do the simple things well for them to understand what you're doing. The whole menu can't be crazy. You can do a few dishes that are really different, but also some simple things so there are things out there for everybody. You just do it, and they'll follow suit. Plus, starting with Michael, we have a reputation for good food, using good products. As much as possible, we use smaller local farms, natural meats, wild fish. So you get more 'food types' coming in here, compared to, say, a Sheraton or a Marriott."

Dessert chef Jack Fisher, from Imperial Beach, was a professional body-boarder in his younger years, but he always loved cooking. "I used to cook with my mom as a young child, and I just fell into the business. I got a job as a cook and enjoyed it a great deal. The first ten years of my career I was working the hot line. I got into desserts when I was working at the Sheraton San Diego, where the head chef didn't like me very much. He suggested I go check out an opening in the pastry department. Since I felt the same about him as he did about me, I thought, 'Let's try that out,' and the pastry chef was just wonderful to me, a great mentor, and I just got stuck on it. That's where I got all my pastry training, and then I went to work at the Loews Coronado [Azzura Point] with Michael Stebner, and went with him to Nine-Ten and Region.

"But sometimes perfect situations don't really work out, so I left Region. Michael's been such a great mentor to me, we're great friends again now. I went from Region to Montage in Laguna Beach for a three-month stint -- the job wasn't what I thought it would be, but the experience was unbelievable. It was the first time I ever worked at a real five-star resort, and it was a really good experience. But it wasn't the right thing for me. When I was leaving Nine-Ten, the manager said, 'If you ever want to come back, just call,' so I did.

"Working with Jason is fantastic. He has a lot of energy, he's a great team leader. We've been doing a combined effort. A lot of his food is very creative and he's great at presentation -- everything he does looks as good as it tastes." In addition to his venturesome desserts, Jack handles the cheese selection, makes the mozzarella and ricotta, helps make the salami, and makes the pasta (tortellini) that's on the menu now. "It's the art of hand-crafting things that's exciting to me," he says. What's his favorite dessert? "My favorite is always the *panna cotta*. No matter how big a dinner somebody's had, they can always have *panna cotta* and feel satisfied. That combination of cream and in-season fruit, everybody can enjoy it. It's so versatile, and it's sexy. It has the shimmer and the waggle."