

BARDESSONO

Chez Panisse Alumni Creates Style at New Luxury Hotel

BY JANICE FUHRMAN

Like Bardessono, a new luxury hotel in Yountville, Cristina Salas-Porras, the hotel's chief tastemaker, has style and energy. She's fluent in three languages, an accomplished businesswoman, and wife and mother of two young boys. It's no leap that she's one of the major creative forces behind the hotel's state-of-the-art food and drink, eco-friendliness and aesthetic sensibility.

As assistant for nine years to Alice Waters of Chez Panisse, Salas-Porras says she has a "crazy skill set" of food, culture, business sense and social conscience that resonated with the developers of the Bardessono project. At Chez Panisse, she oversaw business negotiations, developed web sites, and put together special events, but she yearned to work on another hotel project after helping to open Tokyo's Park Hyatt hotel. From studying and working in Japan for three years, she gained perspective on hospitality and generosity. "When you come into a modern Japanese hotel or a traditional ryokan, you are made to feel like a member of the proprietor's family and know that they are going to take care of you in every way," she explains. She wanted that same philosophy to reign at Bardessono.

An illustration of the 62-room hotel's commitment to its guests is found in the coffee it serves. Oakland-based Blue Bottle Coffee Company, an uncompromising roaster of coffee beans, only sells coffee beans less than 48 hours out of the roaster so the drink can be enjoyed at its peak. Also served at Chez Panisse, Blue Bottle comes from organic, pesticide-free, and shade-grown beans. "The idea," says Salas-Porras, "is that we should serve a perfect cup of coffee to our guests. That required a big commitment on our part outside of normal hotel thinking." There are no coffee pots in the rooms, for instance, because the rules for making and serving Blue Bottle Coffee are so exacting.

At the hotel's bar, "All the liquors that go into our drinks are artisanally made and come from pockets of immigrant cultures from all over the world where native spirits have evolved into artisanal spirits," says Salas-Porras. The syrups are handmade each day, the juices freshly squeezed. Like Bardessono's coffee, the drinks represent "what we're doing in all aspects of the hotel each day."

"Everything I learned from Alice and Chez Panisse about food translates to design. Basically, it is all about restraint," she



says." With an emphasis on local materials and local artisans, Salas-Porras particularly relates to the use of recycled and repurposed materials such as ceilings made from old wine casks. Salvaged Tuffa stone in the hotel's entry was quarried in Napa County 80 years ago for the original Bardessono family home. Much of the artwork is re-purposed, like a sculpture made by a Bay Area artist from old paperback book pages. "I don't believe in spending money just because you have it. I believe in finding creative solutions to problems and I don't believe in waste," she explains. The developers used wood scraps from guestroom doors for tables in the elegant restaurant. "Because the wood is beautiful, the tables don't require linens, so we don't have to buy them and launder them every day. This is something else I got from my experience at Chez Panisse: no waste and no compromise."

In the 92-seat restaurant, Salas-Porras collaborated with chef Sean O'Toole, who previously worked for Michael Mina and Alain Ducasse. "We're both from restaurants with similar identities. We wanted the food to be approachable, easy and delicious, and to stimulate all the senses." They offer freshly roasted nuts on Saturday afternoons, fresh-pressed apple cider, pizza from the hotel's portable pizza oven, even Sno-cones. "I cannot recall every fancy meal I've eaten, but something like a Sno-cone with lemon verbena syrup on a particularly hot day is a sensual experience I do remember."

Janice Fuhrman is the author of three books about wine: Wine Aficionado, Wine Genius, and Napa Valley: The Land, The Wine, The People. Janice specializes in writing about wine, food and travel, and has written for Decanter, Wine Enthusiast, The San Francisco Chronicle, and many other publications. She lives outside San Francisco with her family.