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Ame, Redd

Two Napa Valley chefs step up and out

BY HARVEY STEIMAN / PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELISSA BARNES

Hiro Sone and Lissa Doumani, the husband-and-wife team behind Terra in St. Helena, meld Japanese, Italian and French ideas into a heady mix at their new San Francisco restaurant, Ame. Pronounced “ah-may,” the name means “raindrop” in Japanese. • Opened this past November in a lovely space off the hard-edged modern marble lobby of the new St. Regis hotel, Ame isn’t what you’d expect—it’s sleek and doesn’t feel like a hotel restaurant. Floor-to-ceiling glass windows, warm wood walls and a divider of hand-cut vertical slats frame an L-shaped dining room featuring spotlighted tables and a view of the partially open kitchen. Young professionals make up the sharp-looking crowd.

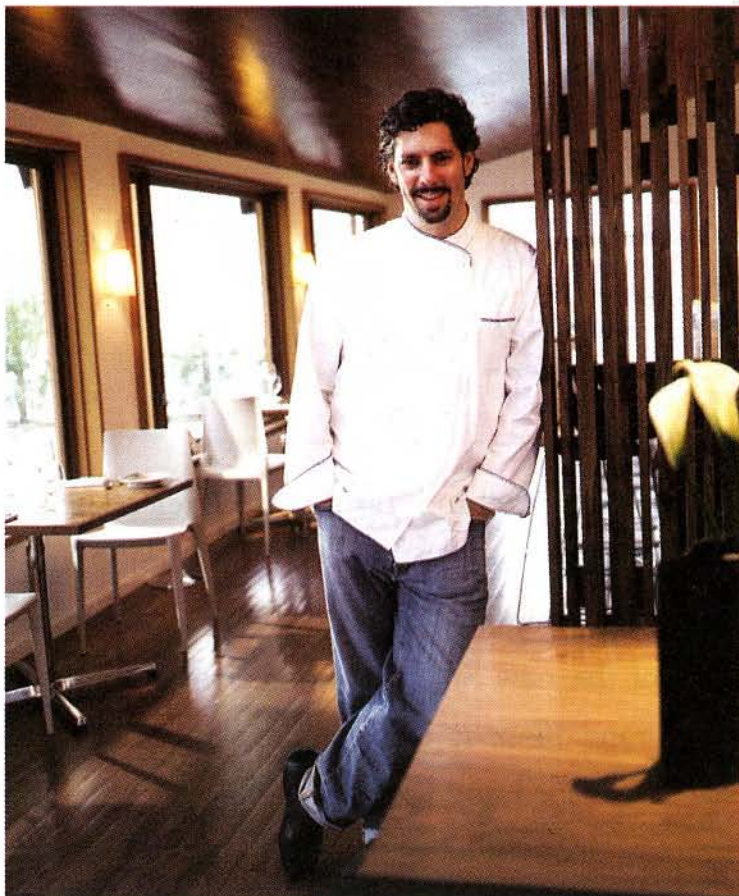
There is a small sashimi bar at the entrance, and sashimi can also be found on the dining-room menu, along with other raw fish options such as reinvented Mexican seviche and Italian crudo. On the cooked side, there’s risotto with foie gras, pork chops with Dijon verjus and red wine-braised beef cheek, all of which could have come from a French or Italian farmhouse. Although Sone has always used elements from his native Japan at Terra, he lets his Japanese side emerge more prominently at Ame, and the results are often spellbinding.

One stunning appetizer, called “Lissa’s Staff Meal,” tosses thin strips of raw cuttlefish with sea urchin, quail egg, wasabi and soy sauce. High-level Japanese chefs specialize in this sort of heady juxtaposition, and it is decidedly wine-friendly (as is most of the food), bringing out all the best elements in a New Zealand Chardonnay. Broiled sake-marinated Alaskan black cod in a shiso broth, a signature dish from Terra, tops the main-course list here. Seviche arrives wrapped in thin slices of watermelon radish to resemble a sushi roll. Those braised beef cheeks (Wagyu beef, no less) come with a slice of amazingly juicy sweetbread, crisply coated with crunchy, light panko, forming a sort of sweetbread katsu.

The menu isn’t all cross-cultural. Some dishes are pure California, such as the heirloom beet salad with goat cheese dressing, the sweet of the beets playing off the gamy flavors of the cheese. Others are more imaginative, such as the wittily named “spaghettini crabonara,” artisanal pasta



Husband-and-wife team Hiro Sone and Lissa Doumani opened Ame in San Francisco’s St. Regis hotel last November, following the success of their St. Helena restaurant, Terra. Ame, which means “raindrop” in Japanese, offers a blend of Japanese, Italian and French cuisines.



Former Auberge du Soleil chef Richard Reddington is back, partnering with several Auberge principals to open Redd in Napa Valley.

cooked al dente and dressed with fresh Dungeness crab and a light crab-butter sauce.

The friendly but highly professional servers are ready and willing to describe anything on the menu, and they do so without condescension. "It's a little scary how many people get it," says Doumani. "I thought I would have to spend a lot more time explaining the menu. But people are just diving right in."

As at Terra, Doumani is responsible for the desserts. She met Sone at Spago Los Angeles, where she was a pastry chef and he was a sous chef in training. They opened Terra together in 1988. Doumani's classic chocolate cake is warm and oozing, accompanied by a magenta scoop of sugar beet ice cream, a surprising but palate-pleasing combination. Frozen yogurt soufflé bathes in an irresistible mango sauce.

The wine list centers on California and France, and the fresh, fruity, mineral wines cozy up well to the vibrant, striking flavors of the food. At 150-odd labels, the list sacrifices depth for a wide range of interesting options such as Selene Sauvignon Blanc Carneros Hyde 2004 (\$52) from California and Te Awa Farm Chardonnay Hawkes Bay 2002 (\$59) from New Zealand. California Cabernets from the late 1980s and early 1990s, including Dunn and Spottswoode, go for \$150 to \$250 each. Some three dozen well-described sakes are available by the glass or carafe.

It remains to be seen whether Ame will continue to soar quite so high when Sone and Doumani return to St. Helena and divide their attention between their two restaurants, as they inevitably must.

Their competition got tougher in November with the opening of Redd in Napa Valley, featuring the highly personal cooking of Richard Reddington. The former Auberge du Soleil chef has a

knack for elevating rustic food to a higher status without losing any of the comforting aspects.

Redd occupies the old Piatti space in Yountville, but it's hardly recognizable as the same building. Where Piatti was casual, Redd is sleek and modern, with slanted ceilings revealing hidden skylights, polished wood accents and clean, sharp lines. The chairs are comfortable and the tables widely spaced to ensure private conversation. The sun sets over the Mayacamas Range outside the windows, which look out onto Washington Street. There's even an open patio around a rectangular pool for dining alfresco.

It's a great setting for this long-awaited restaurant. Tiring of the breakfast-lunch-dinner-room service routine of high-end resorts, Reddington left Auberge du Soleil in early 2004. His partners in Redd are among the principals in Auberge, including Claude Rouas and Bob and Tim Harmon, who also have the Piatti chain and El Dorado Kitchen in Sonoma (see Dining Out in the Oct. 15, 2005, issue).

It took nine months longer than expected, but the makeover was worth the wait. Reddington's ability to achieve an uncanny equilibrium of flavors and textures on every plate makes for seductive food that should place Redd among Napa Valley's elite restaurants. Peekytoe crab from Maine makes a refreshing first course, complemented by tangerines to point up the natural sweetness, avocado to add a touch of richness, shaved fennel for an herbal crunch and citrus vinaigrette to pull it all together.

Unexpected juxtapositions wake up dish after dish, such as the tang of black olives to accent a duck ragù over pillowy gnocchi, or the soft, meaty texture of braised oxtails to emphasize the freshness and vitality of pan-roasted wild striped bass. Reddington never overloads a plate with too many ideas or ingredients, but he doesn't shy away from using everything he needs in order to find a distinctive balance.

This natural harmony makes Redd's food a cinch to match with wine. The opening list has 160 options on it, a bit meager for a heart-of-the-Napa Valley restaurant that has been in the works for 18 months. It centers on recent California vintages, with a few nods to top Bordeaux and Burgundy. The only serious vertical is Viader in five vintages dating back to 1996. The list of 25 half-bottles encourages experimentation. We happily drank 375ml bottles of Bründlmayer Grüner Veltliner Kamptal Langenloiser Berg Vogelsang 2004 (\$29) and Etude Pinot Noir Carneros 2003 (\$32); both melded nicely with all the food.

Ame is a city restaurant with a vibrant scene, and Sone's eclectic and brilliantly executed food brings a taste of Napa Valley to San Francisco. Redd is like a country counterpart, with Reddington's subtle style turning bucolic fare into serious cuisine. Both ideas work beautifully.

Ame

689 Mission St., San Francisco Telephone (415) 284-4040 Web site www.amerestaurant.com Open Lunch and dinner, daily Cost Entrées \$20-\$34 Corkage \$20 Credit cards All major

Redd

6480 Washington St., Yountville Telephone (707) 944-2222 Web site www.reddnapavalley.com Open Lunch and dinner, daily Cost Entrées \$19-\$27; tasting menus \$70-\$105 Corkage \$20 Credit cards All major