

# A New Look at Disney's California Grill: A Walt Disney World Dining Review

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Whenever I hear Disney is going to do a rehab of one of my favorites, I get nervous. What happens if it's not as good once it reopens?

That's exactly how I felt when it was announced that the California Grill at Disney's Contemporary Resort would be closing for a good chunk of 2013. I will say that, on our last visit there in December 2012, we could see that work was needed here, but what would it be like afterwards? It's been one of our staples on every visit we've made to Disney for more than a decade, so it was with some trepidation that we returned there on our most recent trip.

However, we needn't have worried. The second I stepped out of the elevator, I knew the rehab had breathed new life into the California Grill. Suddenly it felt so much more light and airy, as befits a restaurant on the 15th floor of one of Disney's deluxe resorts. Bright colors have been used, with reds, yellows, and oranges very much the predominant feel here, which adds a warm atmosphere. I don't know whether it was just my imagination, but I also thought the windows let in more light, making it feel even warmer in the late afternoon sun.

□ Considering there were 15 of us dining together at the California Grill, I was surprised we were seated in the main dining room, rather than one of the private rooms, but in a way I preferred it, as we got the same experience as everyone else. Prior to dining here, I had read a lot of concerns about the noise levels following the changes. I honestly can't comment on that, as our table was so big, and we were fairly loud. It will be interesting to see what we make of that if we go back as a much smaller group.

□ Bearing in mind we were such a large group, we had some superb service from our server, Walter. How he remembered who had ordered what, I do not know, but it was an impressive display, and as you'd expect from a server at a Signature restaurant at Disney, he was exceptionally knowledgeable about both the drink and food menus.

So, on to perhaps the most important aspect of any meal -- what was the food like? I think the first thing to say is that the menu, with a couple of exceptions, really hadn't altered that much. It still starts with items from the wood-burning oven, following by a wonderful sushi selection, before moving on to soups, salads and appetizers. Once you've read all of those options, then you're on to the entrees.

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□We decided to do what we usually do here at the California Grill -- share a flatbread and a sushi dish. With only two flatbreads on the menu, we had no option but to go for the one with beefsteak tomatoes, mozzarella de bufala, and aged balsamic. We thoroughly enjoyed this, and felt that the flatbread was a lot lighter than previously, which was a good thing, bearing in mind it's an appetizer.

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□The other flatbread option was a pork pate flatbread, with roasted garlic, mascarpone cheese, and royal trumpet mushroom chips. This is where we found the menu did differ to previously, as formerly all the items under the wood burning oven were flatbreads, but now there are other items, such as baked jumbo prawns, three-meat signature meatballs, and roasted surf and turf, an unusual dish featuring New Smyrna clams, saffron-infused corn chowder, chorizo butter, and bone marrow. The latter ingredient is one I've certainly never seen served up at any meal before.

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□For our sushi option, we went for the California combination roll, made up of jumbo lump crab, avocado, cucumber and shrimp tempura. The flavors in this were absolutely beautiful, and I'm relieved to say that, given the departure of sushi chef Yoshie Cabral when the California Grill closed for its rehab. I must admit that I had worried that the quality of these dishes may drop, but thankfully that isn't the case. On that part of the menu, you could also try the tuna four ways (poke, tartare, maki, and nigiri), spicy kasan roll, dragon roll, and pork belly nigiri. Some of the items were familiar, although I have to confess I don't remember the pork belly item before, but then as a non-meat eater, I don't always pay attention to the meat dishes.

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□If you fancy the idea of soups, salads, or other appetizers, on the night we dined at the California Grill, some of the options included a crispy rock shrimp salad, carrot and cilantro soup, heirloom tomatoes, and an old favorite, Sonoma goat cheese ravioli.

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□The entrees, as you'd expect, differed from previously, as they often differ from one night to the next. I decided to take a risk, and opted for the Georges Bank scallops with French curry spice, squash ravioli, citrus butter, and Sylveta arugula salad. I'm not a fan of spicy food, and I have to confess I've never come across French curry spice, so I was intrigued by this dish, but also worried. I had good reason to, as the spice was too much for me, although I was determined to finish eating the dish, as the scallops were absolutely melt in the mouth.

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□My husband went for the pork two ways; grilled tenderloin, lacquered pork belly, goat cheese polenta, mushrooms, and apple sauce. I heard

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no complaints from him about his choice! That night the menu also included oak-fired filet of beef, Florida red snapper, sweet potato gnocchi, and pacific halibut.

☐ Sadly, the California Grill's dessert section of the menu was the most disappointing for me. It looked as if they were trying to have some fun with the desserts, but in their creativity, they had removed some of the old staples, most notably the Valhrona chocolate cake, which was not a good discovery. I was quite shocked that nothing on the dessert menu appealed to me, so I went for the cheese selection, which was excellent.

☐ So what didn't take my fancy at the California Grill? The sundae sampler; a set of "unique and playful sundaes" made up of caramel corn, Coke float, and strawberry-basil, which somehow didn't feel like it belonged on the menu of a Signature restaurant. There was also a lemon meringue cheesecake, and warm homemade fritters; banana-stuffed and cinnamon-dusted, with toasted caramel marshmallows and a trio of dipping sauces.

☐ My husband got the chocolate pudding cake with Nutella filling, meringue kisses, and mint Chantilly, and while it was lovely, it was exceptionally rich, far too rich for any of us around the table to finish off.

☐ Despite the disappointing desserts, I have to say that, all in all, we were very impressed with our meal at the California Grill. After such a lengthy rehab, it's wonderful to know that it's still a complete delight to eat there. It delivers time and time again, and that's why we keep returning to the California Grill time and time again.

*About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)*

Article last updated: 02-20-2014

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