

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

High kosher in Oxnard

Tierra Sur, a high-end kosher restaurant, is one of the best restaurants in Ventura County.

By S. Irene Virbila
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The server pours a splash of ruby Syrah into my glass and waits for me to taste. The wine is rich and full-bodied, tasting of blackberries and wild herbs. This 2003 special reserve is the top Syrah from Herzog Wine Cellars in Oxnard — and it's kosher. With this and its other special reserves of Chardonnay, Cabernet and Merlot, the state-of-the-art winery is busy proving how far kosher wines have come in recent years. And it's a long way from Manischewitz.

I'm drinking this bottle over dinner at Tierra Sur, the high-end kosher restaurant that is part of the winery complex. It may be an unconventional setting, but nevertheless the Herzog family is quite serious about their restaurant. They looked a long time before settling on Todd Aarons as chef. He's a culinary school graduate who worked with Judy Rodgers at Zuni Cafe in San Francisco, then in New York, Tuscany and Israel and, in fact, had his own kosher Mediterranean restaurant in New York called Mosaica.

Tierra Sur has all the appointments — linens, stemware, fine china — of a serious restaurant anywhere. Though many in Los Angeles may be unaware of it, gastronomes at the west end of the San Fernando Valley, and in Oxnard and Ventura, are frequent diners. And why not? This is one of the best restaurants in Ventura County.

From the first bite of delicious house-marinated olives, you know you're in the hands of someone who pays attention to details. And when you order the *platillos* — small plates of warm salt cod beignets, marinated mushrooms *à la grecque* and smoky baba ghanouj, it's clear Aarons has a working knowledge of the Mediterranean.

I like the way he mixes and matches cuisines from different parts of the region. *Piadina*, the typical flatbread of central Italy, might be garnished with Spanish chorizo and served with a frisée salad dressed in a Middle Eastern-inspired *za'tar* dressing. I was thrilled one night to find *boudin blanc*, the tender veal and chicken "white sausage" from France, plated with roasted pink lady apples and baby turnips. Salads, whether hearts of romaine in an anchovy dressing or Boston bibb with watermelon radishes in a green goddess

dressing, are lovely.

Hang on. The entrees are right in the zone too. Aarons' menu follows the season, and as much as possible he uses local or organic ingredients. You might find wild Alaskan king salmon with leeks braised in one of Herzog's white wines and served with a root vegetable Spanish tortilla and tarragon salsa. He marinates lamb in pomegranate before roasting it, for example. And he accompanies it with broccoli rabe and tender fava beans. One of his specialties is grilling over a wood fire. Whether you keep kosher or not, what's not to like about Aarons' massive wood-grilled rib-eye with Merlot green peppercorn sauce? Sometimes he does mustard and juniper-crusting venison as well, starting it out on the grill to give it that wonderful smokiness.

The wine list presents all of Herzog's wines, most available by either the glass or the bottle. There's even a rosé, and also a special reserve blend of Cabernet and Syrah or another that adds Zinfandel to the mix.

For dessert, go straight to the churros and chocolate. These squiggly doughnuts originate in Spain and are a delightful way to end a meal at Tierra Sur. Or try a glass of late-harvest Riesling or a sparkling Moscato.

A word of caution: Check up on your holidays. Once, on the spur of the moment, some friends and I drove out for lunch, only to find the restaurant closed for a Jewish holiday. Remember too, they're closed for Friday dinner and all day Saturday.

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Tierra Sur

Where: Herzog Wine Cellars, 3201 Camino del Sol, Oxnard

When: 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m., 5-9 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays; 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Fridays. Closed Saturdays and Jewish holidays.

Price: Dinner appetizers, \$7-\$15; main courses, \$25-\$41; desserts, \$8-\$10. Lunch appetizers, \$4 to \$7; main courses, \$12-\$22; desserts, \$6-\$8.

Info: (805) 983-1560, www.herzogwinecellars.com