



Serendipity Meets Service at Stunning Timber Cove Resort

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I bite into a hot Dungeness crab beignet dipped in sriracha aioli, but it's really forbidden fruit. I'm not supposed to be here at Timber Cove, and I'm not supposed to be having lunch at its Coast Kitchen restaurant. No one is, which helps makes this guilty pleasure all the more enjoyable.

Bill and I have driven to Timber Cove at the suggestion of Conrad Hunter, who owns Foxcroft Wine Co., our favorite Friday date night wine bar in Charlotte. Years ago, Conrad and his wife had spent their honeymoon at this California retreat near Fort Ross State Historic Park on the northern edge of the Sonoma Coast. They still rave about its scenic location atop a wooded, rocky bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Timber Cove was built in 1963 by famed architect and original owner Richard Clements Jr., a fourth generation San Franciscan who developed many of the city's public monuments. Inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright's organic architecture, Clements designed an A-frame structure serenely nestled into and complementing its natural surroundings.

We decided Timber Cove would be a perfect destination for lunch, our midday timing and the fog-free sky enabling us to enjoy clear panoramic views along coast-hugging Highway 1.

Bookended by weather-worn, craggy cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean on our left and soaring hills, their billowing grasses bleached by the summer sun, to our right, we drink in the seascape. Perhaps the visual drama, ever more heightened at each bend in the road, should have tipped me off that another surprise awaits us.



Approaching destiny

We pull into the parking lot at Timber Cove, and know immediately that something is off-kilter. Rather than a serene haven that would be so conducive to rest and relaxation, per Conrad's description, we encounter an active construction site. Partially open fencing and assorted panel vans and pickup trucks occupy the parking spaces. The sounds of sawing and hammering echo beyond, and men and women in dusty jeans and sweatshirts roam nearby. Hundreds of new redwood panels, aligned along an outside wall of what appears to be a multi-tiered wing of guest rooms, speak to a major remodeling project underway.

The main entry doors to the stone, wood, and glass structure are flung open, seemingly an encouraging sign. Thinking that translates to open-for-business, we pass through them and enter the lobby. Inside, the scene is a complete reversal of the work-in-progress exterior, which makes it difficult to reconcile with the activity outdoors.

Before us is a showplace.

An expansive Great Room features a chic and stylish mix of modern and retro pieces. Multiple seating areas with clean-lined and contemporary chairs and tables in neutral earth tones are artfully arranged for convening, conversation, and contemplation. At the far end looms a soaring, floor-to-ceiling stacked stone fireplace flanked by large windows. A long wooden bar with low-slung wooden stools is stocked with gleaming glassware and unopened liquor bottles. All rest beneath a rustic, antler-style chandelier hanging from the exposed wooden beams of a cathedral ceiling. More wood features, like the prominent support beams, and dark metal railings add to the refined hand-hewn character. Place settings top the tables in the adjacent dining area, where a beckoning fire glows in a freestanding fireplace.

Now this is the lunch spot we imagined when we began our drive.

A woman stands behind the front desk, discussing an upcoming reservation by phone. That further fosters our belief that Timber Cove surely is operating despite the construction. She greets us warmly, and asks how she may help. We request a table for lunch. Timber Cove, she sincerely regrets to inform us, is closed to the public for another couple of weeks.

We are crestfallen. Our plan for an intimate meal in this spectacular venue turns out to be misguided and futile. At once, she kindly offers to make calls to locate another lunch destination for us.

And then, serendipity strikes.

A man with a curious expression strides over, asks what's happening, and the woman takes him aside to share our plaintive story. He walks to two other men seated at a small table on the far side of the Great Room, and engages in a brief conversation. The one wearing striped pants nods in agreement.

Back comes the man. He identifies himself as Reto Torriani, general manager of Timber Cove. Beaming, Reto tells us he has just spoken with the chef. "Timber Cove," he says, "would be delighted to host you for a complimentary lunch in the dining room."

Overwhelmed by his generous offer, we nevertheless counter, willing either to forego lunch so as not to put them out of their way or to pay for our meal. Reto stands firm. "It would be our honor and pleasure to pamper you."

He says we're the first walk-ins since the property closed in early January to undergo an extensive restoration. Further, he adds, serving us will afford an opportunity for the kitchen and dining room staff to practice working in their newly revamped spaces.

What an unexpected and marvelous gift. We take our seats in the restaurant, with a clear view of the water. The show begins.





Service Timber Cove style

In addition to the crab appetizer, we indulge in other superb seasonal specialties from the lounge menu: Maine lobster and Dungeness crab mac and cheese with taleggio lobster sauce, and tomato bruschetta with olives, cucumber, and lemon oil. In light of the roller-coaster drive we'll soon make on the return home, we regretfully decline our server's offer of wine.

Word of our presence obviously spreads among the staff, and several come by to say hello. I sense they're happy to resume their normal routine, if only for a moment, of ensuring to guests' well-being and enjoyment.

Reto returns to our table. With a conspiratorial glint in his eyes, he insists we have the butterscotch pot de crème with sea salt and spiced pecan brittle for dessert. He claims he ate five of them in the past week as he laughingly pats his stomach. We can't say no, but we do pass on another offer of wine. He tells us he's a native of Switzerland, so the height and twists of the coastal drive don't faze him.

We thank Reto one last time, and he modestly shrugs, "If you can't be nice in a small town, you shouldn't be in the hospitality business."

A week or so later we learn that Timber Cove, now fully reinvigorated, has indeed reopened. That the resort offered this high level of service to unexpected visitors when it had yet to open to the public surely must speak to the superior level of quality and attention its patrons are enjoying anew. It also reinforces one of the joys of travel – what actually happens on the road can be even better than what you anticipate.

By the way, Conrad, Timber Cove would be a great second honeymoon site, too.



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