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It begins with scented hand towels

THURSDAY, 23 JUNE 2016 | MARC D'ENTREMONT



La Paz Waterfall Gardens at Peace Lodge

It begins with refreshing, moist hand towels scented with lemon grass and glasses of chilled passion fruit juice upon entering the lobby. A visitor becomes a connoisseur of this refreshing *amuse-bouche* that teases and soothes the senses. Scented hand towels and exotic juice blends transition the visitor from the tropical humidity of Costa Rica's lush countryside to an enclave of tranquility that is a Small Distinctive Hotel.

Nine boutique hotels, each averaging fewer than 50 rooms, are members of the Small Distinctive Hotels of Costa Rica. Each is privately owned, several in the second generation, unique in architecture and setting, luxurious with fine dinning and backstories as distinctive as the properties. The *amuse-bouche* – *the tease* – is that all this comfort helps others; each property visited touched the human side in unexpected ways.

Hotel Belmar – the burden of a name



Hotel Belmar, Monteverde, Costa Rica

Craft cocktails are not usually associated with the world famous natural wonders of the Monteverde cloud forests (<https://travelpenandpalate.com/2016/07/12/monteverde-biological-reserve-is-a-climate-change-laboratory/>) of Costa Rica. Quakers, cows, hostels and hikers come to mind first. But when you're Pedro Belmar, second-generation general manager of a famous family mountain retreat, continued success requires thinking out of the box. Or in this case nothing boxed.

In the Belmar's La Chispa cocktail the refreshing, earthy aromas of the rain forests are recreated.

- premium Sloane's Gin
- black tea syrup made from the hotel's organic garden
- cedar pine needle smoke
- fresh lime

Crushed ice quickly wets a cocktail glass, as local dry cedar pine needles are lit with a torch. Quickly the glass is inverted over the flame – should extinguish immediately – and rest on the needles capturing the smoke. The cocktail is mixed. Upright the glass and pour into the captured smoke.



bar ingredients from Hotel Belmar organic garden

Sipping a smoky cedar scented La Chispa ensconced in the all-cedar Hotel Belmar (<http://www.hotelbelmar.net/>) overlooking forests tumbling down to the Gulf of Nicoya is all a tease – a visual amuse-bouche. It's the forerunner that everything good for the guest at a Small Distinctive Hotel should be good and sustainable for 21st century Costa Rica. It should be at your fingertips. "We're growing smaller," Pedro Belmar said with a faint smile, expressing a vision for the new look of success.

Hotel Grano de Oro and the House of Light

A blend of old, restoration and cutting edge, Hotel and Restaurant Grano de Oro is firmly established as San Jose's premiere property. Yet it's very design from the restoration of a classic Victorian colonial early 20th century mansion was to maintain the hospitality extended to houseguests in a spacious urban home. With understated elegance and graceful service, the exquisite cuisine of Executive Chef Francis Canal Bardot, has set the standard for three meals a day for a quarter century at Grano de Oro and San Jose. Hidden gardens, art and the soothing sound of water fountains follow even into the rooms. A quiet private garden patio with fountain in room six was an opportunity to discover Casa Luz.



A private guest room garden Hotel Grano de Oro

Nearly 20 years ago Grano de Oro founders Eldon and Lori Cooke were instrumental in creating the Asociacion Reaccion en Cadena por Nuestra Ninez and opened Casa Luz ("House of Light") in San Jose. Casa Luz provides multi-year residential programs for abused teenage mothers and their children and a safe home. The program includes all necessary monetary, emotional and psychological support victims' need. Just ask and the front desk will be pleased to discuss this significant humanitarian project while you enjoy the elegance of Hotel Grano del Oro (<http://www.hotelgranodeoro.com/>) knowing a portion of profits help support a house of light.

Peace Lodge – inside the Cloud Forest



Of course there's a tropical garden with stone waterfall shower in the skylight ceilinged bath of the guest suite at Peach Lodge. After all it's nestled within La Paz Waterfall Gardens. In 18 large individually decorated suites, guests luxuriate in river stone hot tubs on plant-bedecked balconies and within private courtyards. Rooms with massive wood honed beds and river stone gas fireplaces open onto views of waterfalls and meandering free-formed trout ponds all designed to make you resign the tensions of the day – the trout may appear on the menu as a real amuse-bouche.

Peace Lodge (http://www.waterfallgardens.com/about_peace_lodge.php) is an integral component of the privately owned La Paz Waterfall Garden, both the visions of Florida entrepreneur Lee Banks, which protects a plethora of local fauna and animals in this area of the forests and encompasses five stunning waterfalls. Peace Lodge and La Paz Waterfall Gardens are on-going eco-tourism success stories with exciting culinary

news forthcoming.

Cuna del Angel – discretely guarding your health

It all starts with the bread. It's gluten free. It tastes good. It's whole grain bread with quality organic ingredients prepared by someone who understands proper techniques as in all good cooking and baking.

At Hotel Cuna del Angel (<http://www.cunadelangel.com/>), besides practicality due to a family member's celiac disease, Tom York has every reason to prefer that his restaurant serve only organically grown and produced foods 100% gluten, GMO, and hormone free. Tom has been a devotee of healthy living spanning a decades long career. Many ingredients come from Tom's own farm, and much of everything else is locally sourced.



Gluten free bread at Hotel Cuna del Angel

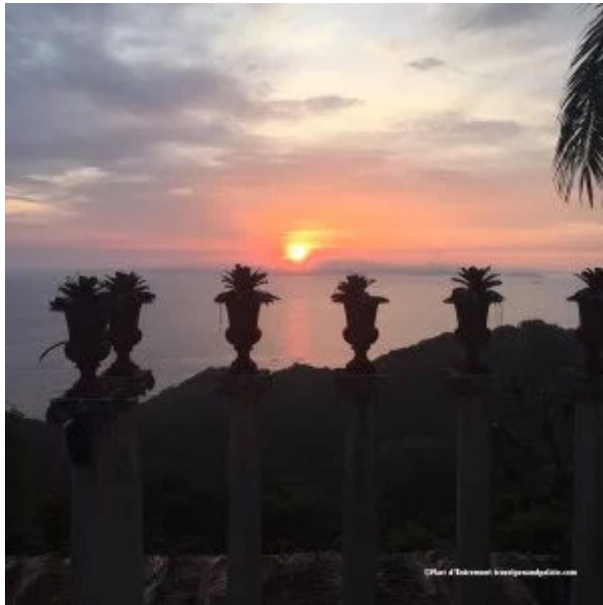
Yet the tease is that a guest would never know their health is being guarded unless the menu is read in detail. Dishes from the classic continental repertoire such as flambé mango on vanilla sorbet and fresh snook with a creamy basil sauce are all components of a classic up-scale menu nutritionally balanced. The soft ambient lighting in the open walled palapa dining room overlooking the jungle and Pacific Ocean certainly are digestives in themselves. That's just one part, as readers will discover in upcoming articles, Tom plays in helping to preserve this cradle of the Angel.



infinity pool at Villa Caletas

Villa Caletas – gazing into infinity

Denis Roy emigrated from France with a dream somewhere in his head that materialized into creating a fantasy in Costa Rica. On over 700 acres of improbable, undeveloped coastal and mountain wilderness, using building methods that hearkened back to the days of the pyramids, the multi building hotel, restaurants and spa complex of Villa Caletas and the Zephyr Palace emerged over a decade. A fusion of river stone castle and tropical Victorian, the 50 rooms range from stunning to awe inspiring.



Sunset at Hotel Villa Caletas

Sunsets from the amphitheater are legendary, and views encompass forested hills and the Gulf of Nicoya from many angles. Yet those beautiful hills required total reforestation just a decade ago due to overgrazing. The lush peaks of today were barren, rocky and eroding into the clear Pacific below. Ecological restoration is ongoing and Villa Caletas

(<http://www.hotelvillacaletas.com/location>) spearheads major reforestation projects in the region.

That's why the many infinity pools dotting the complex become a metaphor for the group of Small Distinctive Hotels owners, managers and chefs this journalist interviewed during an eight-day tour. They were all rooted in reality, but liked to tease. My upcoming articles will let you in on some amuse-bouche recipes – the visions they see gazing into infinity.

When you go: Juan Santamaría International Airport (SJO

(<http://www.govisitcostarica.com/region/city.asp?cID=407>)) is served by many airlines worldwide and within an easy 20 minute drive of downtown San Jose. **Getting around:** Costa Rica has an extensive inter city bus system and many toursit van options. The easiest transportation is renting a car. Costa Rica's road system is generally in good condition.

Disclaimer: The author was a guest of Small Distinctive Hotels (<http://www.distinctivehotels.com/>), ENroute Communications (<http://enroutecommunications.com/>) and Revista Ander de Viaje (<http://www.revistaandar.com/inicio/>).

Transportation within Costa Rica provided by Toyota Rent a Car of San Jose (<https://toyotarent.com/>). A Rav4 made Costa Rica's mountain roads, especially the few unpaved, safe and comfortable.

Save



(<https://travelpenandpalate.com/2016/07/15/cream-of-pejibaye-a-costa-rican-national-dish/>)

Chef Francis Canal Bardot cream of pejibaye soup, hotel and restaurant Grano de Oro, San Jose

Additional articles on Costa Rica by Marc d'Entremont:

Cuna del Angel is discretely gluten-free in Costa Rica (<https://travelpenandpalate.com/2016/07/18/cuna-del-angel-is-discretely-gluten-free-in-costa-rica/>)

Monteverde Biological Reserve is a climate change laboratory

(<https://travelpenandpalate.com/2016/07/12/monteverde-biological-reserve-is-a-climate-change-laboratory/>)

Cream of Pejibaye: a Costa Rican national dish (<https://travelpenandpalate.com/2016/07/15/cream-of-pejibaye-a-costa-rican-national-dish/>)

Costa Rica and the vision of Pedro Belmar (<https://travelpenandpalate.com/2016/06/27/costa-rica-and-the-vision-of-pedro-belmar/>)

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Hellenic News of America (<https://hellenicnews.com/?s=Marc+d%27Entremont>)

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