

Someone's In The Kitchen

They Are Back At The Top!

By **RICHARD** and **AMANDA PAYATT**
Special to CASA

THE WINE CASK IS A WORLD-CLASS SANTA BARBARA INSTITUTION. Beloved by all before it changed hands a few years ago, it was a must-visit restaurant for locals and tourists alike. When it changed hands, as restaurants often do, it went downhill and closed. It felt like a part of the heart of Santa Barbara had broken. Then, a year ago it miraculously reopened, under the direction of former owner, Doug Margerum, and his new partner, Mitchell Sjerven, of Bouchon and Seagrass restaurants. They reopened both the Wine Cask and Intermezzo, their informal bar and cafe. Restarting a restaurant takes a lot of time and adjusting. One year in, they have a new executive chef, and a team that is just as cohesive and wonderful as it ever was.

The new executive chef is Spencer Johnston. His selection is a maverick move, but a brilliant one. Spencer is one of those marvelously talented guys who worked his way up from the bottom, without the normal course of going to any culinary school. Spencer was born in San Luis Obispo, surrounded by fresh, local, healthy food. When Spencer was a mere ten months old, this father gave him a gag gift of a spatula for Christmas. His father jokingly declared: "My kid's going to be

a fry cook." How little he knew. Spencer was always cooking at home. Constantly thinking about food, he was working on getting his flavor profiles perfectly memorized. By the time he was in high school, he beat out two culinary school grads for his first position at a restaurant. This was at the well-regarded Bistro Laurent in Paso Robles.

Over the next dozen or so years, he went from restaurant to restaurant, honing his skills. He wound up in San Diego, working at local favorites Stingaree and Jsix. Stingaree is a massive restaurant and club enterprise in the old Gaslamp Quarter, serving up to 2,400 people a night. You learn your chops and you learn how to cook fast in that kind of environment. It was also a big time opportunity. He left Stingaree and got a spot at The Pearl Hotel. There, he turned around The Pearl, and as executive chef there for two years, he made quite a reputation for himself. This attracted the team at The Wine Cask. And who can say no to The Wine Cask? Or to Santa Barbara?

Now Spencer is placing his own signature on The Wine Cask. And once again, Intermezzo has a separate menu. This allows them to have a shared-plate casual dining experience in one room, and then, as Spencer puts it, "this sexy dining room." In the kitchen, Spencer is

a cool customer. If he is nervous about taking over this world famous restaurant, he certainly doesn't show it. His cook line is remarkably quiet. The kitchen is permeated by an overall sense of unhurried calm. It is reminiscent of the tranquil kitchen of Santa Barbara legend John Downey.

As regards to the restaurant experience, The Wine Cask is back up to its old standards. It has an old-school clubby feeling, which is because Wine Director Aaron Watty, owner Mitchell Sjerven, and even pastry chef Rosie Gerard are flitting from table to table. And isn't that Doug Margerum hanging out at the bar?

And the menu.... yum, yum! We must heartily recommend the carpaccio, the Chop Salad, and the goat cheese-stuffed tempura squash blossoms on the appetizer menu. The seared scallop entree is a perfect preparation, combined with fava beans, pancetta, mint, and shaved fennel. Pairing this with one of Carr Winery's pinot noirs was a stroke of the team's genius. The wine list is heavy with local wines and many of the meals are prepared with particular wines in mind. Ask Aaron for wine suggestions, and we encourage you to follow them.



Spencer Johnston, The Wine Cask Executive Chef and **Rosie Gerard**, Pastry Chef

The dessert menu is designed by Rosie Gerard. A native of Baltimore, this petite charmer of a chef deserves her own column. Like Spencer, she is given ample room for creativity. Her strawberry cheesecake is nothing like what you expect. It is light, creamy, and very delicate. The signature dessert is Rosie's Peanut Butter Cup, which features home made peanut brittle. The butterscotch pudding reminds you of what butterscotch pudding ought to be, but seldom is. Don't miss it.

The Wine Cask has long been a local favorite. If you haven't been back since the reopening, it is time to go. They are back at the top of their game.

The Wine Cask is located at 813 Anacapa St. and is open Mon-Thu 11:30am-2:30pm, 5:30pm-9pm; Fri 11:30am-2:30pm, 5:30pm-10pm; Sat 11am-5pm, 5:30pm-10pm; & Sun 11am-5pm, 5:30pm-9pm. Reach them at 966-9463.



Amanda and Richard Payatt combine their considerable writing skills with their incredible knowledge and experience of fine dining to bring you this column.