Historic Claremont Hotel a modern-day marvel

By Susan Wood

BERKELEY – Many would say the Claremont Hotel Club and Spa ages like a fine wine.

It breathes comfort, brings on total relaxation, embraces the good life and evolves through a rich history that permeates every inch of the 279-room, 22-acre estate that turns 100 in 2015.

Just driving into the parking lot of the grand estate can instantly transport a guest into a world where the big desire is to park the car until one is sadly leaving. Hoteliers take note: this is the difference between crash-pad lodging and an experience.

When not relaxing in the room taking in that spectacular view complete with the Bay and Golden Gate bridges, a guest can easily lounge, dine, play tennis (or even ping-pong), swim laps and enjoy any one of the multitude of treatments available in the 20,000-square-foot spa.



The Claremont Hotel successfully blends comfort, activities and excellent

cuisine. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Many hotels bank much of their annual revenue in the summer. But the Claremont is entering the fall during the Cal football season and with much anticipation of a successful holiday season. For the former, any given fall weekend may bring out other university colors along with those from UC Berkeley – situated about a mile away. For the latter, winter holiday events marking the hotel's grand guest experience and local community outreach peaks at Thanksgiving and continues through Christmas. For this, it takes a company crew to string lights and decorate the sprawling place.

Of course, the Claremont isn't just any hotel. Legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright called the resort "one of the few hotels in the world with warmth, character and charm." A guest gets that from the initial walk into the lobby marked by high ceilings and a grand piano and ongoing strolls down the hallways lined with historic photos.

It holds a coveted AAA 4-Diamond rating.

And, there's the history – with a day-to-day countdown to its 100th anniversary posted on its website.

"I'm sure they'll do something big," Cathy of the concierge department said, adding the milestone should also be "interesting."

How the hotel marks its centennial celebration will be up to the sales department and the ownership group Paulson & Co., who placed the iconic hotel on the market for $80 million through Winthrop Realty Trust. The investors bought the hotel in 2011 after former owner, Morgan Stanley, filed for bankruptcy.

The change in ownership is something the staffers have gotten used to about every decade, concierge Sandy said. They all work to put out a great product, regardless of who owns the

place.

Big and interesting changes are customary characterizations for the Claremont from its early beginnings.

Rush for gold ignites golden history

A Kansas farmer named Bill Thornburg struck it rich during the Gold Rush days in California and brought his wife and daughter west with the promise of building an English castle with horse stables on the 13,000 acres he bought in the East Bay. After his wife died and his daughter moved to England, Thornburg sold the castle to the Ballard family. But on a dry, windy day in July 1901, the castle burned to the ground. (That wasn't the first time the property would see a devastating fire. But when the destructive Oakland Hills Fire raged through the neighborhood in 1991, the hotel majestically stood tall and untouched. And according to longtime employee Sue, a Meritage bartender, the hotel got donations "from all over" to help out the victims – many of who evacuated to the hotel.)

In the early 1900s, a realty syndicate led by San Francisco lawyer Frank C. Havens, Francis M. "Borax" Smith of the Twenty Mule Team fame, and local developer John H. Spring bought the property from the Ballards and used its railroad experience with the idea of erecting a hotel resort with a train running through the property. (The rail ran through today's tennis courts.)

One night, a checker game with high stakes between the owners put the hotel into Haven's hands. He modeled a new Elizabethan chateau after another he owned in downtown Oakland called the Key Route Inn. It was demolished in 1913.

After the repeal of prohibition, a state law banned the Claremont from selling alcohol because it was assumed the hotel sat within one mile from the Cal campus. But in 1936, an enterprising student with the help of her friends actually measured the distance and found that the Claremont was located

more than a mile away – by only a few feet. The Claremont celebrated by opening the Terrace bar, which is now part of the Paragon restaurant and bar, and awarded the student free drinks for life.

In the 1930s, guests started flocking to the hotel bought by staffer Claude Gillum for $250,000 to partake in the resort's offerings such as the swimming pool patio complex and live music from the likes of some of the greats of the Big Band era – Tommy Dorsey, Louie Armstrong and Count Basie.

Heritage lives on

To this day, guests and visitors can take in live music with a full food menu at the Paragon Bar.

Guests may also venture off the property to celebrate another landmark milestone. Yoshi's jazz club marks 40 years in Oakland this year with a long list of great acts from saxophonist David Sanborn to acoustical guitarist Earl Klugh. It's easiest to just grab a taxi to travel the five miles to the Embarcadero West. (Note: Pass on the Coit Limousine service as at least one of their drivers had never heard of Yoshi's and insisted on getting assistance from us on how to get there.)

If you don't want to venture out, the Paragon may be just the ticket for late-night activity. On one recent Saturday night, a band with a big steel drum sound rocked a full house. Earlier that day, the bar's terrace was filled with many enjoying the sunshine with a libation and one of the best views in the Bay Area. (Hats off go to the Cal student who circumvented the alcohol ban because the warm November afternoon screamed for a glass of white wine with appetizers.)

Eat, drink and take in the view

One of the great things about the Claremont is you never have to leave the property if you are hungry.

Paragon and Meritage are very different experiences, but what they have in common is gorgeous views of San Francisco. With that iconic skyline, it would be hard to find someone who ever gets tired of looking at it. Plus, there's the Golden Gate Bridge and boats of all sizes – from those with sails to mammoth salties – plying the waters of the bay.

Paragon offers outside seating, while Meritage has a bank of tables along the window with booths behind those that also offer stunning views.

Not wanting to ruin our appetite for dinner, we chose three starters at Paragon to be our lunch. And it's such a nice change to find at least three vegetarian items instead of the customary single (if that) option Tahoe restaurants provide.

The mushroom cigars ($12) look a bit like a cigar, so they are aptly named. But the flavor is nothing like a cigar – which was a good thing. They are served with a spicy truffle aioli. The garlic fries ($7) are tasty, but the problem was with how they were served. The cone container ensured all the garlic was at the bottom instead of distributed evenly on the fries. While they are called Gilroy garlic fries, if you are expecting what is served at AT&T Park, you will be a bit disappointed. The butternut squash ragout ($7) was a great surprise and something neither of us had had before, but would like to again.

On the other side of the hotel is the more formal restaurant, Meritage. But this does not mean one has to have dressy clothes – it is still California, after all, where casual is customary for dinner.

Instead of filling up on a basket of bread, the server brings you a choice of wheat, olive or baguette. More can be had if one piece is not enough, but not having it all on the table meant not testing our willpower and not having any go to waste.

Main courses come in appetizer and entrée sizes. We each opted for the appetizer size just in case we would want dessert. That decision paid off.

The meat eater had the pan-seared Scottish salmon ($13) and barely put her fork down in between bites it was so good.

The vegetarian had the forest mushroom ravioli ($12). It was good, but nothing to rave about.

We were both impressed with the different salads we had to start with – the Champagne poached pear salad ($13) and the special baby greens ($13). It was the dressing that made the dish of greens so good.

Our waiter, Cesar, made a good call in having us try two desserts. Baked fall was the special of the night. It was a bit like a baked Alaska except sweet potato is used instead of ice cream. But what we like the most was the pumpkin curry cheesecake. This is what we would have again – say, at sunset with an aperitif.

Recreational options help burn those calories

Still without getting in a car, guests and club members have ways of working off the desire to lounge, eat and drink.

The pool patio within the Claremont Club entry – where the hit movie “Mrs. Doubtfire” was filmed – comes with three swimming pools and a hot tub. In two pools, much of the emphasis is placed on lap swimming. Afterward, more than 100 padded chaise lounges surround the pools so one can make a day of it. Kids even have their own shallow pool that comes with a unique beach-like sloped entry.

A massive gym with six elliptical machines and five treadmills in one room facing the pool area keep your mind off being inside as the patio calls sun worshipers. The Bay View Cafe is open with a pool patio menu of burgers and sides. In the

summer, a bar is set up on the patio.

For those itching to get out and stretch, urban walks and a hike up the steep Claremont Canyon start on the club side of the property leading down the street near a Peet's coffeeshop along Claremont Avenue.

Berkeley is a town full of its own rich history and now thriving neighborhood microcosms down well-known streets – Shattuck, College, Telegraph and University. Walking, window shopping, eating and drinking is embraced on the weekend. (Note: a stop at the university student hangout, Kips, is suggested for a pint of microbrew and nachos made with homemade tortilla chips and topped with homemade salsa.)

Back at the Claremont Club, tennis enthusiasts may immerse themselves in the club's court clinics, then book a massage to work through the workout.

Pain is part of the pleasure

"Ed*grrrrrrrrr*!"

At random times Kae would make this outburst – mostly walking uphill on our urban walk. But she smiled at the same time.

Edgar was the name of the tennis instructor from the day before. A day later, the glutes were being reminded of how he ran her all over the court.

Dripping sweat and with a beet-red face, she was smiling with a wild-eyed look walking off the court. It had been more than a decade since receiving any sort of private tennis instruction. Kae said the hour clinic was worth every penny. ($90)

She seemed to drool looking at the many courts – some lighted – from our room. If only tennis were a year-round sport in Tahoe.

Two days after Edgar inflicted pain upon Kae's muscles, it was time for Ron to do something about it. With 17 years of experience massaging guests at the Claremont, Ron is the atypical resort therapist. He actually listened to Kae's request to have her keyboarding-tennis dominant arm be tended to. (So often resort massage therapists treat guests like they are on an assembly line instead of the unique body that is on their table.)

As good as Ron was – especially being able to stop Kae from her Ed*grrrrrrrrr*! rant – the $145 for 50 minutes (not even a full hour) was a bit spendy. (So the recommendation is to spend a bit of time enjoying the spa and steam room.) One doesn't have to be a hotel guest to enjoy Edgar's workout.

Many Berkeley residents use the Claremont Club. And one nearby couple who are club members said they even stayed at the hotel when they got their house painted. They bring their small dog, as the Claremont is pet friendly. (Recommended: inquire about crating rules with the hotel.) The hotel takes in many local residents as guests for special occasions ranging from weddings and anniversaries to birthdays and holiday gatherings. (Guests who married at the Claremont decades ago and saved their bill are invited to commemorate their wedding anniversary with room rates comparable to those paid 50 years ago.)

For now, best available rates for bay view rooms (highly recommended) start at $263 per night over the weekend in December. There are discounts amounting to 15 percent off in the fall and "home for the holidays" packages. If money is not an issue, rent the "bell tower" suite for $2,500 a night.

Kathryn Reed contributed to this article.

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