



The Serenity Yoga Pavilion featuring a floating dock for the instructor is just one of many renovations at Rancho Valencia Resort & Spa. BELOW The transformed suites now feel like modern haciendas.

RANCHO VALENCIA RESORT & SPA

Sometimes you can judge a resort by its mini bar. The espresso machine with milk frother and black truffle and white cheddar popcorn had my family at hello, along with the other complimentary room amenities in our luxuriously rustic suite. This was just a taste of the \$30 million transformation that closed Rancho Valencia Resort & Spa for close to a year, reemerging in the fall of 2012 with lavish design enhancements that transformed the casitas, spa, dining and fitness offerings from what once felt like an old timer's bed and breakfast to a modern but still comfy hacienda.

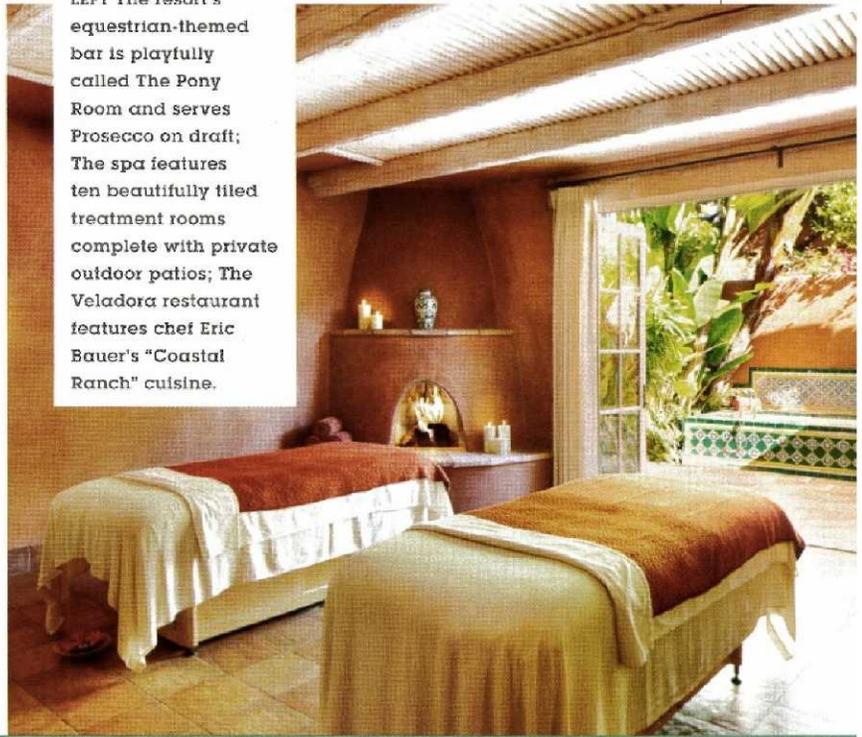
The beloved bones and wood beam ceilings (and that wooden crate morning delivery of fresh-squeezed orange juice in Mason jars with your newspaper) of this Rancho Sante Fe Relais & Chateaux property remain, but the resort's 49 spacious suites now feature custom-made furnishings, massive bathrooms with deep soaking tubs and steam showers, and private patios with fireplaces and whirlpools.

One of the notable additions to this lush, family-friendly property, which is set on 45 acres of gardens, trails, olive groves and casitas, is its new signature restaurant, Veladora, and adjacent equestrian-themed bar, The Pony Room. At Veladora, Chef Eric Bauer's "Coastal Ranch" cuisine seasonally blends the area's local harvests, including





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The resort's equestrian-themed bar is playfully called The Pony Room and serves Prosecco on draft; The spa features ten beautifully tiled treatment rooms complete with private outdoor patios; The Veladora restaurant features chef Eric Bauer's "Coastal Ranch" cuisine.



fruits and vegetables from the highly regarded and nearby Chino Family Farms, with unique flavor combinations pairing seafood, poultry and a variety of prime meats. Some ingredients from Bauer's market vegetable salad – herbs, garlic, beet "soil" and lettuce puree – are actually foraged from the banks of San Dieguito River, which runs through the property, and his honey comes from six on-site bee-hives that sit in an olive grove, which will eventually offer house-made olive oil.

Bauer's menu also presents a selection of house-made extruded pastas prepared daily and paired with seasonal fresh vegetables, seafood and meats such as Maine lobster spaghetti with tomato concasse, toasted garlic, fresh basil and white wine. Complementing Bauer's artistic creations on the plate, we were mesmerized by the restaurant's design focal point, an original work of art covering an entire wall by pop art bad boy Damien Hirst titled *Imploration*, crafted entirely of butterfly wings, the perfect metaphor for the metamorphosis of Rancho Valencia.

The Pony Room, with its old-world furnishing and al fresco dining around fireplaces and lantern lights, draws inspiration from classic American icons such John Wayne, James Dean and Johnny Cash. If you're in the mood for some great people watching, sit back with a glass of Prosecco

on draft (the first of its kind in California), one of more than 100 tequilas, or a hand-crafted, one-of-a-kind cocktail creation and watch the jet setting weekend crowd.

Sample the desert menu as well because there are plenty of opportunities to work off the calories. Wellness was a major initiative for the resort updates. In addition to resurfacing all 18 on-property tennis courts, the Spa at Rancho Valencia and fitness center was expanded with a new line-up of fitness classes, spa treatments and wellness programs with the addition of a 1,000-square-foot, partially open-air Serenity Yoga Pavilion with a floating dock for the instructor, which hosts an extensive list of yoga, Pilates, Zumba and spin classes, retreats and events led by renowned fitness and wellness professionals.

At the re-envisioned 2.5-acre spa, which was already one of the most tranquil and beautiful spas in the state, I opted for the signature Sixth Sense Ritual, which takes place in one of the 10 beautifully tiled treatment rooms, five with outdoor patios that includes deep soaking tubs and rain showers. The re-energizing experience begins with a soothing bath soak to relax the body, mind, muscles and joints, followed by a massage and harmonizing scalp massage with organic Mediterranean myrtle, juniper and organic jojoba, avocado and olive oils. The 120-minute service

concludes with a hand and foot paraffin treatment. Before or after treatments, guests can take advantage of the three temperature-varied therapeutic pools, lap pool and private sun gardens. Two couple's rooms include fireplaces, private patios, outdoor showers and tubs for two.

I was tempted to rush back to my family, who I had left playing on the croquet lawn, but then I was offered an herbal popsicle made with fresh ingredients from the resort's garden, including avocado-lime, cucumber-lemon and honeydew flavors, and decided to take in a few more minutes of bliss. – JUSTINE AMODEO

■ **GO ON RETREAT** :: Tennis, yoga and VIP golf retreats are available throughout the year, but coming up at the end of this month is the second annual performance Cycling Camp, January 23-29, where participants will ride, train and receive personalized coaching by Tour de France rider Christian Vande Velde and special guest pro rider George Hincapie. The camp includes daily pro-led rides, breakfast, lunch and massages at the Spa, a welcome reception dinner and two additional dinners with the pros, riding apparel and gear. Sag Wagons by Porsche, Audi and Range Rover, ride documentation with a pro photographer and five days and six nights at the resort. Cost is \$10,000 per rider, \$16,000 for two riders and \$13,000 for one plus a non-riding guest. :: ranchovalencia.com