

Luminaria Truly Shines

By [Anne Hillerman](#) / [For the Journal](#) on Fri, Jul 8, 2011

Whether you choose the inside dining room or the patio, Luminaria ranks as one of Santa Fe's most attractive restaurants.

The expansive patio with its central covered ramada, elegant draping and classic entrance fountain allows guests to celebrate the all-too-brief summer without the inconveniences of wobbly tables or too much sun. Inside, the ambiance is contemporary, sleek and inviting.

A restaurant as beautiful as Luminaria could get by on looks alone, so it's reassuring to have first-rate service and a menu to match. The new menu, launched in April, features some interesting choices, and every dish I saw was beautifully presented, food as elegant as the setting in which it is served. Our party of five had an opportunity to sample a broad section of the menu, and much of what we had tasted as good as it looked.

We knew we were in good hands from the start when our waiter, Jay, greeted us warmly and recommended some of Luminaria's enticing cocktails. He handled questions about preparations and ingredients with charm and skill. The assistants were good too, bringing baskets of blue corn muffins and biscotti baked in-house and fine crusty French bread from Sage Bakehouse, keeping drinks refilled and removing and replacing tableware with almost invisible efficiency.

Matt Ostrander, Luminaria's new executive chef, has assembled a dinner menu that offers an assortment of creative dishes as well as a few options for the less adventurous. The appetizers were my favorite course. In addition to tortilla soup, Caesar salad (with goat cheese, an avocado dressing and no anchovies), and a garden salad with beets and more goat cheese, the menu includes more exotic and unusual choices. Jay recommended the Ancho Pirogue (Luminaria's version of the classic dumpling) and the house-cured salmon gravlax served with a horseradish crepe.

Luminaria

WHERE: Inn and Spa at Loretto 211 Old Santa Fe Trail, Santa Fe, 505-984-7915

FOOD: Eclectic and upscale.

SERVICE: Excellent.

AMBIANCE: Beautiful dining inside or under a covered patio.

PRICES: \$26-\$32 entrees.

HOURS: Breakfast 7-11 a.m.; Sunday brunch, 11 a.m.-2 p.m.; lunch 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m., dinner 5-10 p.m. Open every day.

Of the three appetizers I sampled, the gazpacho duo was my favorite. This dish pairs a serving of brick red heirloom tomato gazpacho with a second soup, a creamy lemon grass and blue crab bisque. The two arrive in the same deep white bowl, yin and yang, their beautiful colors matched by intense and different flavors (\$10). We also tried the caprese sundae appetizer on Jay's recommendation. This unusual variation on the classic salad looks like dessert, a sort of spumoni, perhaps. The mozzarella is presented as an unsweet, mild "ice cream" and the tomato and basil as sorbets. They are scooped together in a glass dish, topped with roasted garlic foam — an airy essence of garlic, drizzled with richly flavored balsamic reduction sauce and topped with crisp and salty fried capers (\$12). Interesting! The duck tamale, a less experimental appetizer, was delicious from first bite to last. The meat was tender and flavorful, and I loved the addition of kernels of corn to the masa (\$12).

Speaking of duck, the duck entree was delightful. The generous serving included breast meat and the darker flesh of a leg. The juicy, perfectly cooked meat came with a wonderfully different mascarpone-chipotle polenta. The apricot color made me think "cheese," so the spicy, smoky flavor came as a surprise (\$29). The grilled New York strip steak was also complimented nicely by a side of fingerling potatoes and an amazing port wine glaze with a hint of vanilla. The combination might sound strange, but it worked to perfection (\$34). The salmon, advertised as "UK organic," is some of the best I've eaten in Santa Fe. This fish may have traveled a long way to get to Luminaria, but it tasted wonderfully fresh and was cooked perfectly, moist and flavorful. The purple Thai rice made the presentation lovely (\$29). Unfortunately, the micro green and nasturtium salad had no nasturtium blossoms. (The kitchen was out of them.) When we asked about the little flowers, Jay offered to substitute asparagus, and brought us a plate of freshly cooked large spears.

Another highlight was the pork tenderloin (\$32), served as a roulade with fresh spinach inside and Serano ham wrapped outside. The thin layer of ham kept the pork amazingly juicy and tender and added a nice chewy texture to the mix.

The evening's major disappointment was the grilled trout. It looked nice, presented as two light pink filets, deboned but in the skin, lightly encrusted with blue corn meal. The fish itself, however, was dry and flavorless except for the lemon we added (\$29).

For dessert (\$9 each), we sampled a rich flan with a lovely creamy texture and a slight red chile flavor, served with a fresh, light orange sorbet, and a rich Sabayon (custard) served with a warm, extra sweet prickly pear sauce. They were good, but not as tantalizing as the appetizers. Coffee arrived fresh and hot.

Luminaria is establishing itself as one of Santa Fe's top restaurants. I recommend it as an elegant, stress-free experience.