

# 805

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FOOD & WINE

## ROOT 246: A SOLVANG SURPRISE

Bradley Ogden's new restaurant brings California's culinary spotlight to the Central Coast.

### IT'S 7:30 P.M. AND THE DINING ROOM OF ROOT 246 IS THROGGED.

Couples slide into curtained booths eager to taste tonight's selection of seasonal New American fare. Parties of four clink glasses joyously at the tables running down the center of the room. Master chef Bradley Ogden has icicle radishes to roast and pork belly to crisp up, but he's standing next to my table telling me about a woman named Ive: When Ogden was growing up in Michigan, his family would pile into the car and drive for hours to get to Ive's farm just so they could eat her fried chicken dinners. He's never forgotten her cooking and tonight he pays homage to her on his menu with Ive's shake and bake fried chicken. He makes it his own by using Rocky Junior chicken, a heritage breed, and he leans it over mashed potatoes enriched with crème fraîche. Then he adds a bright tangle of apples and poached cherries to the plate.

Why is he taking the time to tell me about Ive? He just can't help himself. He's a man in love with food and the practice of feeding people. This love—and Ogden's visionary style—will transform not just the Chumash-owned Hotel Corque, of which Root 246 is a part, or Solvang, where it is planted. Ogden's way of running a restaurant will likely affect the entire restaurant industry in the Santa Ynez Valley and surrounding communities. With Root 246, Ogden has the infrastructure and the momentum to tip the scales toward more sophisticated dining. His reputation as a master of New American cuisine as evidenced by his awards (Best Chef of California by the James Beard Foundation, and Chef of the Year by the Culinary Institute of America) and in his restaurants (One Market in San Francisco, Arterra in San Diego, Bradley Ogden at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, which won Best New Restaurant from the James Beard Foundation) could draw diners from a hundred miles around.

Ogden has relocated a team of professionals willing to teach a young generation of local talent how to cook, how to serve, and how to mind the details. Executive chef Jonny Hall moved to Solvang from Mountain View, California, where he's been in the Ogden fold as a part of Lark Creek Restaurant Group for years. At Root 246, Hall has the power to drive the menu, which changes daily, in any

direction he sees fit. Most dishes are the result of heavy collaboration between Ogden, Hall, and chef de cuisine John Church. The trio is building relationships with farmers, fishermen, wineries, and growers in the 805.

The resultant food is pure, focused, and uncluttered: Long white icicle radishes are roasted with a bit of sea salt and served with only a crock of butter to bring out their subtle flavor. Another starter on the day of my visit, crispy Berkshire pork belly, sits on a small, spicy tamale pancake; glazed pineapple marries the meat to the heat. Pierogi (Russian ravioli) are filled with dense ricotta cheese; to offset the mildness of the cheese and pasta, vinegary pickled beets ring the plate. Ive's fried chicken is full of flavor with just the right amount of crunch on the outside plus apples and cherries to help offset the richness of those potatoes mashed with crème fraîche. For dessert, a trio of cherries was on offer: a gorgeous little cherry-blackberry pie, a cherry-blueberry cobbler with the perfect crust, and a small scoop of cherry-vanilla ice cream. Since the menu is so seasonal, you may not see these dishes on your visit, but you will have a range of well-thought-out plates to choose from.

The director of food and beverage Jens Kliemann, in conjunction with Root 246's sommelier Michelle Abiad, has instituted some progressive wine policies for the Central Coast. Wine prices are kept low—most of the 1,800 bottles cost between \$50 and \$60—and the list is made up mostly of California wines. Plus, every Wednesday night a local vintner is invited to be the guest sommelier at Root 246. The night I was there, winemaker Wes Hagen of Clos Pepe was circulating the dining room, chatting away with diners, and pouring not only his own Santa Barbara pinot noirs but also recommending bottles from other wineries.

Ogden designed the restaurant to have module dining: lots of small rooms instead of one big space. Diners can lounge around on an outdoor patio, stare at multiple flat screens in the chocolate-brown bar, tuck into very high-backed white wing chairs in yet another bar area, sit in the main dining room, or book the glass-walled chef's table adjoining the kitchen. Every room feels cozy and the main dining room always looks full.



The entire menu is served in every room, so diners can have a different experience each time they return. Ogden is excited about the effect he and his restaurant can have on the area where he's now living. "There's so much potential for growth here," he told me. "It's phenomenal. It's sort of like when we opened Lark Creek Inn in 1989." Twenty years later, it's Solvang's turn. (For more about Bradley Ogden in his own words, see the *P.S.* column on page 96.) ■  
*Root 246 is located at 420 Alisal Road in Solvang. Call 805-686-8681 for reservations. Visit [www.root-246.com](http://www.root-246.com) for more information. Root 246 is open for dinner nightly. The New American menu changes daily with entrées ranging from \$14 to \$35. Prix-fixe menus are in the works; brunch is served on Sunday.*

Chef Bradley Ogden's New American cuisine at Root 246 includes dishes like pan-roasted local halibut, with lobster and sweet corn chowder, baby prawns, and a spicy corn fritter (above); and wood-grilled Coachella valley figs with honey goat cheese and La Quercia prosciutto (top right). Instead of one large room, several small rooms make for intimate dining (right center); the menu changes seasonally based on fresh ingredients.