

Ritz-Carlton offers classes for high-end entertaining



Diane Boate of San Francisco shares her party experiences at an early summer class about cocktail party etiquette.

Photos by JOHN O'HARA / The Chronicle

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Details, details.

On Wednesday, eight students gathered at the restaurant of the Ritz-Carlton Half Moon Bay—where windows let in afternoon sun, salty air and oceanside views—for a class on cocktail party etiquette taught by Syndi Seid of Advanced Etiquette, a San Francisco training company.

"I'm an expert in cantaloupe martinis now," said Suzanne Slader of Menlo Park, bouncing into a chair.

It's hard to believe that anyone staying at a Ritz-Carlton would need lessons in luxury living, but apparently you can never get too much of a good thing.

The resort has launched a summer school of sorts, to help tony guests—and aspirants to the high life—brush up on wine, art history, floral arranging and the like.

The weekly highbrow classes are \$35 for an hour of instruction, a relative bargain at less than a penny per second (excluding the valet parking fee). And although it won't be summer until June 20, the season kicked off a month early so that the 16 classes could finish before fall begins Sept. 22.

The class is also open to the public, so on this day, students were a mix from near and far. Some—Slader among them—had even attended two prior classes on *hors d'oeuvre* and cocktail mixing, which gave her bragging rights over her new classmates.

Eddie Cook of Half Moon Bay, a biotech consultant, walked over from her home in a gated community bordering Half Moon Bay Golf Links.

"I live in the most energetic, party-happy street in Ocean Colony," she said. "I'm interested in learning more about how to comfortably throw a party. I'm frazzled and not

The etiquette class was given in an alcove room overlooking a golf course and the Pacific Ocean at the 3-year-old Ritz-Carlton hotel in Half Moon Bay.

enjoying myself as much as I'd like."

Over Roederer champagne and snacks (the sesame spiced ahi tuna tartare on crispy wontons and smoked salmon pinwheel on potato crisp that they'd learned to make May 5), students were told that a cocktail party requires more than nuts and mixed drinks to be a success.

Seid's tips included the obvious—planning, attention to traffic flow, multiple drink and food stations, and waiters—and the not-so-obvious, such as bite-size appetizers (to prevent tugging at the food and spilling it on clothes) a greeter at the door (to welcome guests, take their handbags and guide them to drink stations) and tactful ways to get lingerers to hit the road at night's end. Better than saying, "I'm sorry, I'm pooped," she suggests: "Forgive me, but I've got an early morning. It was so nice of you to come."

Seid suggested stockpiling, so as to be ready for impromptu get-togethers. "I'm sure you all keep a supply of champagne and wine," she said. "Slices of individually wrapped pate are a handy freezer commodity because they take only two or three hours to thaw," she said.

Gifts to the hosts (including bottles of wine) should be placed on a side table and never immediately opened, unless the guest insists, she said. Plate clips (which are never used at the highest high-society parties) were suggested to help attach the stem of a wineglass to a plate, free a hand and make eating while

standing less awkward. Seid also taught how to sip from a glass without leaving lipstick marks (a semi-risque maneuver requiring your tongue to be a buffer between the rim of the glass and your bottom lip).

It's also important to instruct helpers in their tasks, it seems.

"I hired a young girl, very elegant, to help serve, but I didn't instruct her," Beth Smith, a nursing professor at the College of San Mateo, told the group. "She was the first one in line for the food, and was out there dancing in a miniskirt."

The classes were conceived by the hotel's executive chef, Xavier Salomon, who'd been encouraged to develop cooking classes for the public.

"There are so many talents throughout the hotel, from the front of the house to the back, why not draw upon all of them?" Salomon said.

Coming classes include one on fresh Italian pasta by Peter Zampaglione on June 2; a wine-tasting class by sommelier Michael Rasmussen featuring California reds on June 9 and whites on Aug. 11; and floral arrangement with Orna Maymon of San Francisco's Ornamento (whose works decorate the hotel) on June 16.

Hotel spokeswoman Diana Gil-Osorio said classes will also be offered in winter, starting in November.

The hotel, now 3 years old, is doing brisk business on weekends and holidays, thanks to vacationers and business clients.

The staff opened a ballroom to serve 970 diners at the Mother's Day brunch and put an additional 400 guests on a reservations waiting list. The hotel had a petting zoo for children at Easter, and will host an oceanside benefit concert July Fourth featuring Symphony Silicon Valley.

In addition to building a sense of community, the classes, truth be told, are also a way to increase exposure by drawing people in during slow periods in the middle of the week.

After all, personal connections, if not pampering, are keys to binding clientele in industries serving the wealthy.

"The biggest coup for us," said Mark Weiss, the resort's executive assistant manager, "is that guests get to know us as people. We give them a good time and a taste of what we do every day."

For information call the Ritz-Carlton Half Moon Bay at (650) 712-7696 or go to www.ritz-carlton.com and select the "location" link to find the Half Moon Bay summer school class.

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