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An open door policy

"There's so much hype now in the Napa Valley," says General Manager Stanley Morris. "At French Blue we just want to have fun and serve delicious food at a fair price."



Warm and cozy

On the patio, below, made with locally sourced stone, a fireplace and radiant heat ward off Napa Valley's early-morning chill. And the banquettes interiors are warmed by piped hot water.



Extras on the side

Below: A side-wall boutique in the main dining room — which features rustic wood tables and wicker chairs — sells French Blue ware: farmer logo dishes, house-made jams and olive oil and water bottles that benefit the Napa Valley Vine Trail.

FRENCH BLUE

It's neither blue nor, technically, French. In fact the interior of French Blue, the haute yet down-home St. Helena dining spot, sports a distinctive white paint named in honor of the restaurant's architect and co-owner, Howard Backen.

Housed in the former Vanderbilt furnishings store, the restaurant is named in homage to that shop's beloved, 50-year-old French blue front doors, which now frame the restaurant's restrooms. The structure, owned by Backen, designer of such vaunted spaces as Press, Kokkari and Harlan Estate Winery, was reimaged by the architect and his interior-designer wife, Lori Backen.

Other partners in the venture include co-owners Stanley Morris (a former Teatro ZinZanni partner who worked with Backen and Larry Mindel during their Il Fornaio days), attorney Steven Kay and restaurateur-vintner Leslie Rudd, whose winery and nearby Mount Veeder farm (600 fruit trees, honeybees, 300 Rhode Island Red chickens, olive groves) supply the restaurant with fresh produce curated by farmer Omar Morgan.

Evocative of a contemporary Wine Country home, by way of the Hamptons and Provence, the wood-beamed interior features a fireplace, rustic wood tables and wicker chairs. A community table faces the buzzing open kitchen and zinc-topped bar.

The all-day menu stars rustic, mostly house-made and wood-fired fare by chef Philip Wang, a CIA graduate and former Rubicon protege of chef Traci des Jardins.

"Napa Valley locals have to fight it out, annually, with 5 million tourists," said Morris. "So it's important to us that French Blue is moderately priced, open all the time and truly about, and for, the community here."

And while bunches of Bentley-driving tourists have descended, valley stalwarts (including Margrit Mondavi, vintner Molly Chappellet, art collector Pam Kramlich) are staking their claim, too. Including Dylan Martini, a French Blue assistant server who's so gung-ho about his colleagues' creations that he dines there on his days off. "The food is amazing: It's all grown or sourced within a 200-mile radius," he explained during an alfresco lunch with friends. "Unless I'm cooking at home, why would I eat anywhere else?"

— Catherine Bigelow

Open 8 a.m.-11 p.m. daily. Seating is first come, first served. 1429 Main St., St. Helena, (707) 968-9220. www.frenchbluenapa.com.



Neat seats

Tourists and locals alike are staking claims on where to sit at the charming, 20-seat outdoor patio.

Local flavor

The farmer logo pays homage to French Blue's commitment to farm-fresh produce.

