



For the Chicago-based Crown family, Casa Elar—on the grounds of the , which they just happen to own—is a cherished home away from home. Especially in spring, when the Windy City is hardly a place to contemplate dining alfresco. But ice and snow are no problem at the lovely Italian-style residence, whose pergola looks out to a landscape that evokes Tuscany and is, therefore, the perfect place to gather for a Mediterranean dinner.

“This is our favorite way to entertain,” says Nancy Crown. “We have a large, extended family who all use Casa Elar at various times of the year.” Designed by William Mahan, the 10,400-square-foot villa was built in 2005 for her in-laws, and their initials (L and R) account for the residence’s name. Since the home was finished, however, it’s been the site for Thanksgiving dinners, weekend getaways for grown children, golf and spa outings for sisters- and brothers-in-law, and also a memorable wedding rehearsal dinner for daughter Kasey, the only girl among the five Crown offspring.

Most recently, Nancy and her husband, Steve, invited a few friends to join them for a Tuscan weekend, where she and Ojai Valley Inn’s executive chef Jamie West composed a dinner menu to suit the season and the surroundings. West says he wanted to “create a menu that accents the feel of the house, like the wood-burning pizza oven,” and he used that as a starting point for appetizers, which also included antipasti such as assorted meats and cheeses.

Nancy, a self-professed “foodie,” says she and West—who recently cooked at the prestigious James Beard House in New York—share a “passion for organic, sustainable food. Jamie plans menus around what is growing well in his garden and what is seasonally at its best.” With that in mind, they designed a family-style

meal that began with arugula salad and hearts of romaine and moved on to strozzapreti (a light spaghetti dish), prime New York steak, and grilled marinated shrimp with vegetable couscous and marjoram and roasted garlic dressing, and served with a Syrah and Chardonnay from Ojai Vineyards. Desserts continued the Italian theme with tiramisu, zabaglione with berries, Ojai lemon meringue tarts, and chocolate glazed profiteroles with vanilla cream.

West enjoys cooking for family occasions such as these. Nancy and Steve Crown “appreciate good things,” he says, “not necessarily complicated things, but the good life, like the house and what’s there. The view is spectacular, and you feel that they have created something special.”

“There is a long family history with the inn,” says Nancy, “as well as a long California history. Steve’s family has been involved with it since the 1950s. Casa Elar is a new attraction, as it provides services of the hotel and perfect seclusion, surrounded by a Tuscan landscape.”

Indeed, when the family is not in residence, Casa Elar is available as part of the Ojai Valley Inn’s accommodations for guests and for special events. The house still has a particular significance for Nancy, though, who remembers her daughter descending the circular stairway in her wedding dress. “It was simply a perfect moment,” she says. Perhaps Casa Elar has the power to transport everyone. “You look around, and you would think you are in Tuscany.”

For more informatin about **Casa Elar**, contact Ojai Valley Inn & Spa, 905 Country Club Rd., Ojai, 800-422-6524, ojairesort.com.

By Joan Tapper, Photographs by Mike Gardner