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Seductive setting, Provençal dishes at Chez Papa resto

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Current architectural fashion dictates that a loftlike sensibility be incorporated into just about every design. What's often missing is the romantic sizzle that once was a part of most fine-dining experiences.

Chez Papa Resto brings back that sexiness. The soft lighting makes everyone look about a decade younger. Luxurious details soften the industrial edges. And the lusty food crafted by 2005 Chronicle Rising Star Chef David Bazirgan is as sensuous as the decor.

The 70-seat space still maintains a modern feel. There's an exposed concrete beam, bare wood tables, and other elements that point to an urban location, but they're balanced by textural details that make diners look, and feel, good.

The high black ceiling, floated and dropped to help quell some of the harsh sounds, is pierced by glimmering black chandeliers, some shrouded in gossamer fabric boxes, making the interior take on that complexion-enhancing glow.

Checkerboard panels of chocolate brown horsehair cover the back wall, the orange banquette featuring a dramatic curved back that reaches halfway up the wall. The space between the tall paned windows overlooking the plaza is covered in a subtle print fabric; another wall is wallpapered in dark woven grass. An open-mesh cane partition shields the large opening to the kitchen so diners can catch glimpses of food preparation, but aren't bombarded by the clank of pans and the shouts of cooks. While there's always a lively din, care has been taken to mute the harsher sounds so diners can focus on the conversation.

David Bazirgan has done his part by creating a rustic French-inspired menu that feels familiar but has enough twists to seduce even a jaded palate. When I look over the menu, I want to order everything, which I did over subsequent visits. Everything - 13 appetizers and eight main courses - sounds appealing. They're well prepared, too - not a clunker in the mix.

Steamed mussels (\$16) are sparked with tarragon, piment d'Espelette (a Basque chile) and pastis. Two seared scallops (\$13) are topped with pine nuts set on a vivid green swipe of fava bean puree, and the grilled lamb chops (\$16), a signature dish at the original Chez Papa on Potrero Hill, get a burst of Provence with lavender salt and an ultra-fresh ratatouille with chunks of tomato, zucchini and yellow squash.

Bazirgan is adept at blending rustic and urban elements in stylish ways. Port-glazed sweetbreads (\$15), enhanced with hen-of-the-woods mushrooms and buried under a frothy, fragrant cloud of spring garlic emulsion, have the earthiness one expects in the French countryside. Crab mixed into a salad (\$15) with aioli and diced mango, takes on white-tablecloth status when molded into a cylinder, topped with shaved celery and arranged over Champagne mango coulis. Small dots of piquillo pepper sauce and herb oil also add color and flavor.

While there's sophistication and subtlety in some dishes, the chef knows when to pump up the volume. The New York steak (\$28) is served with a creamy rich bearnaise sauce, adding a heady licorice scent to the subtle grassiness of the nicely charred beef. Rosemary perks up the exceptional thin-cut fries alongside, with a hot tingle of freshly made aioli.

Provence is again reflected in the roasted monkfish (\$25) with potatoes, clams and tender calamari. The waiter pours a bouillabaisse fumet over all the elements, releasing a blast of memories for anyone who has eaten this famous fish stew in France. He also brings out a little pot of rouille, with the pungent bite of garlic and chile, and three toasts so diners can slather it up to suit individual tastes.

The rich lamb daube (\$22), its chunks of meat braised in wine from Chateauneuf-du-Pape, is another dish that captures the essence of the region. Stained almost black from the wine, the big chunks begin to flake apart as you work your fork through to incorporate the rich gravy, baby turnips and carrots. A drizzle of rosemary oil completes this beautifully rustic dish.

In a subtler vein, Bazirgan creates a velvety slow-poached halibut (\$26) capped in a cloud of truffle foam and resting on a bed of silken ribbons of leeks, pieces of asparagus and a creamy lemon beurre blanc sauce.

Similar plays of flavor and texture emerge on just about every dish, whether it's grilled salmon (\$21) washed in an orange sauce with braised fennel and basil, or chicken (\$21) served two ways - the breast cooked sous vide style, and the confit leg placed on potato puree with pistou, ramps and natural juices freshened with lemon.

Pastry chef Yuko Fujii also interprets the classics. Baba au rhum (\$8) is cut into wedges, soaked in rum and simple syrup, and accompanied by pineapple and rum raisin gelato. She lightly perfumes panna cotta with almonds and basil (\$8), and molds chocolate fondant (\$9) atop a pond of orange-scented creme anglaise.

She takes a creative leap with the strawberry "ravioli" (\$9), turning the fruit into al dente leather packets with a thin filling of honey-thyme cream. They rest in a fresh fruit puree thinned with Muscat. While the flavors come together nicely, it wasn't as satisfying as the more straightforward desserts.

Even with these creative detours, there's no denying the strong French vibe provided by owners Jocelyn Bulow and Marc-Henri Sempere. Their experience in the food business also informs the service. The waiters understand the menu, what's offered on the cheese plate, and know how to treat customers. On one visit, when my guest spilled a full glass of water, the waiter quickly moved us to another table instead of spending time mopping it up.

This type of astute service creates a synergy with the food and ambience that should help Chez Papa Resto conquer its pioneering location in the new Mint Plaza, next to the shell of the old U.S. Mint. It's an area in transition, one that 12 years ago crushed well-known chef Michel Richard when he opened Bistro M (in the Hotel Milano) next door to San Francisco Centre.

Much has changed in the past few years, with the expansion of the mall and opening of Bloomingdale's, though Mint Plaza is still a little off the shopping corridor. However, with the visibility of the outdoor plaza and 60 outdoor seats, it could become a popular gathering place. With Chez Papa, Blue Bottle Coffee across the plaza and a steakhouse going in sometime this year, Mint Plaza seems about to take off.

FOR A 360-DEGREE

view of the restaurant, go to sfgate.com/food.

The Wine List

If you have any doubt about the pedigree of Chez Papa Resto, the wine list will set you straight. In addition to the impressive 24 by-the-glass offerings, there's also pastis service. A page in the wine list explains the lore and techniques surrounding this popular licorice-flavored spirit.

The 19-page beverage list, which also has excellent house-made cocktails and concludes with a well-honed collection of spirits, is very well chosen. There are some great wines, and also the second labels of some of the best of Bordeaux. There are also some surprises like the 2004 Fort Ross Vineyard Pinotage (\$69).

However, the markups are some of the highest I've seen lately. The 2007 Le Bonheur Sauvignon Blanc 2007, for example, can be purchased at retail for about \$10, but it's \$32 on the list.

The red wines aren't particularly well stored. On my visits, they were repeatedly served too warm, which is unacceptable considering the markup.

If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$20 (two-bottle maximum).- *M.B.*

Chez Papa Resto

414 Jessie St. (off Fifth Street, between Market and Mission), San Francisco; (415) 546-4134 or chezpapasf.com.

Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. Dinner 5:30- 10 p.m. Sunday-Wednesday, until 11 p.m. Thursday-Saturday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Paid lots nearby.

Overall: Rating: THREE STARS

Food: Rating: THREE STARS

Service: Rating: THREE STARS

Atmosphere: Rating: THREE STARS

Prices: \$\$\$\$ Very expensive (most entrees \$25 and above)

Noise rating: Noise Rating: FOUR BELLS Can only talk in raised voices (75-80 decibels)

RATINGS KEY

FOUR STARS = Extraordinary; THREE STARS = Excellent; TWO STARS = Good; ONE STAR = Fair; NO STARS = Poor

\$ = Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under; \$\$ = Moderate: \$11-\$17; \$\$\$ = Expensive: \$18-\$24; \$\$\$\$ = Very Expensive: more than \$25

ONE BELL = Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels); TWO BELLS = Can talk easily (65-70); THREE BELLS = Talking normally gets difficult (70-75); FOUR BELLS = Can talk only in raised voices (75-80); BOMB = Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings. Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.

Michael Bauer is The Chronicle's restaurant critic. E-mail him at mbauer@sfgate.com. Read his blog on [sfgate.com](http://www.sfgate.com) and visit [sfgate.com/food](http://www.sfgate.com/food) for comprehensive Bay Area restaurant reviews and listings.

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