

BAY AREA



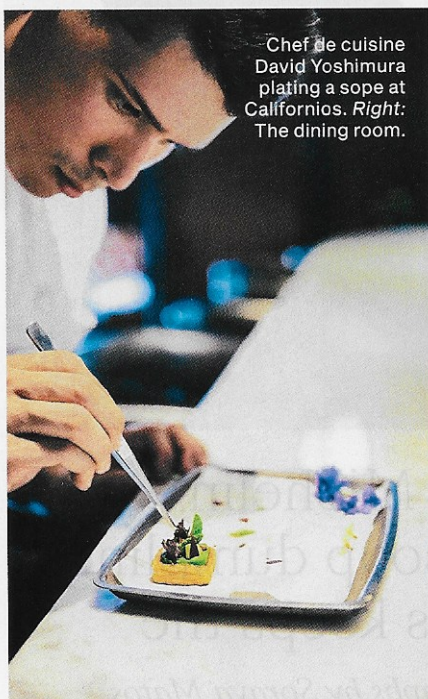
Prawns with seaweed and whey at Atelier Crenn in San Francisco.

San Francisco's Big Appetite From Michelin-starred tasting menus to slurpable soup dumplings, one of the world's great dining cities keeps the courses coming. *by Jonathan Kauffman. Photographs by Soraya Matos*

SERVING UP POETRY

In the most heavily Michelin-starred region in the U.S., the chefs of the city's most ambitious restaurants are keeping their public rapt by becoming storytellers, in ways both subtle and not. At chef David Barzelay's Mission District spot **Lazy Bear** (lazybearsf.com), where each course is served to the entire dining room at once, Barzelay might describe how his porcini-mushroom fondue was inspired by midcentury dinner parties. He might also mention the forager who brings him the mushrooms, and how he collects spring redwood tips and fresh blueberries to enhance the earthy flavors. "It communicates our love and reverence for the wild, and also our sense of place," he says.

At **Atelier Crenn** (ateliercrenn.com), Dominique Crenn's poetic riddle of a three-star tasting menu arrives at the beginning of the meal, and only as the courses progress do diners work out exactly what the description means. "Spring has come with its cool breeze," began the early summer edition, "see—the



Chef de cuisine David Yoshimura plating a sopo at Californios. Right: The dining room.



A view of historic Chinatown from Mister Jiu's restaurant.

efflorescing beauty with rosy cheeks rises" (rosé and a Grassy Bar oyster, in this case). Crenn compares the progression to that of a wave in the ocean. "It's about building a sense of discovery," she says, one that is less about what she found at the farmers' market than about memory.

The drama of some other menus—Korean American **Benu** (benusf.com), Moroccan **Mourad** (mouradsf.com), and Cal-Indian **Campton Place** ([\[place.com\]\(http://place.com\)\) among them—comes from the chef's own biography, plus a fertile blend of ingredients and cuisines. At the two-star **Californios** \(\[californiossf.com\]\(http://californiossf.com\)\), which mixes flavors from all over Mexico with ingredients from across California, chef Val Cantu recently decided he wasn't telling enough of the story behind his food. "A lot of the story of Californios has been me being frustrated with how Mexican cuisine has been treated in this country and trying to show this drastically different thing," Cantu says. Instead of forcing a speech upon customers before each of the 15 or so courses, the former English major now gives them a small book. They can glance through and see they're having fish next, or flip back to read that it's "pescado asado of blue nose medai next to a mole amarillo of saffron and chilhuacle amarillo peppers, finished with *uchuva* and yellow-pepper curls."](http://tajcampton</p>
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He has been playing with an introductory course of tiny bites that encapsulates his cultural identity—a small piece





From left: Dim sum at Palette Tea House; its dining room. Below: Rustic Italian fare at Che Fico.

of fried catfish, to represent his Texas upbringing, say, along with a button-sized arepa to honor his Venezuelan mother—so diners can see how the meal flows from those experiences.

NOUVEAU CHINESE

Demographically, the Bay Area has one of the largest Asian American populations in the country: More than 20 percent of San Francisco residents are Chinese American. When Brandon Jew opened his Michelin-starred restaurant, **Mister Jiu's** (*misterjius.com*), in 2016, he was thrilled to reacquaint himself with the vibrancy of the historic Chinatown. “There’s a lot of strength here from politicians, business owners, and landlords,” he says.

The classically trained chef is part of a generation of restaurateurs remaking Chinese American cuisine in their own image. Jew stuffs his quail with sticky rice, dries scallops himself for his potent XO sauce, and bakes local trout in a salt crust, borrowing from France and Italy as well as China. At the nearby luxe boîte **Eight Tables** (*chinalivesf.com*), chef-owner George Chen has his cooks remix the classics with aplomb: they roast Peking ducks with a decidedly nontraditional kumquat glaze and stir-fry green beans with salted plums and Chinese olives.

The innovative spirit is not restricted to Chinatown. You can order grapefruit-sized soup dumplings and green-tea milk buns at **Dumpling Time** (*dumplingtimesf.com*) in the Design District, or scissor-cut noodles tossed with wild boar at **M.Y. China** (*tastemychina.com*) downtown. Then there’s **Palette Tea House** (*palette*

teahouse.com), on Fisherman’s Wharf, where dim sum masters trained in China collaborate with American-born chef Stephen Nguyen to produce psychedelic dim sum, including the “black swan,” a crisp cloud of charcoal-tinted taro garnished with a filigree bird’s head, and shrimp and lobster *har gow*, whose opulent flavor comes from an injection of buttery lobster jus.

HUMBLE PIE AND SUBLIME PASTA

Forty years ago, Alice Waters opened a café focused on a wood-fired oven—upstairs from her acclaimed Berkeley restaurant, *Chez Panisse*—and built a destination spot around high-end rustic fare. The idea has spread nationwide. But the Bay Area is still where the gift for rendering simple food sublime reigns supreme.

At **Del Popolo** (*delpopolosf.com*) near downtown, for instance, *pizzaiolo* Jon Darsky and chef Michaela Rahorst match fire-blistered, naturally leavened pizzas with smoked Scamorza fritters and roasted broccolini dabbled with togarashi aioli. A few neighborhoods away in NoPa, customers wait hours outside **Che Fico** (*chefico.com*) to taste chef David Nayfeld’s cappelletti stuffed with morels and favas and his pizza with fermented chili peppers, onions, and pineapple. Nayfeld says that he’s simply trying to offer a

wide array of choices. But Che Fico makes “casual” staples into something more: a dining experience that’s soigné but not suit-jacketed—appropriate for the perpetually casually attired San Francisco scene.

Another clutch of restaurants is taking pasta into experimental realms. At **SPQR** (*spqrsf.com*) Matt Accarrino smokes flour to make the fettucine that he sauces with sea urchin and smoked bacon. At **Flour + Water** (*flourandwater.com*), where the pasta tasting menu is the stuff of legend, chef Ryan Pollnow flavors gargati pasta with fennel pollen and then tosses it with smoked duck and fresh fava beans. Evan and Sarah Rich, who run **Rich Table** (*richtablesf.com*), add ramp pesto, pistachios, and Thai basil to campanelle pasta. The Riches’ 2018 cookbook includes recipes like bucatini with pork belly and watermelon, avant-garde combinations that sound unlikely but taste amazing. “We take more of a chef approach and think of it as our duty to push the boundaries,” Evan says. Sarah counters, “I just think pasta is fun.”

