

A critic's picks on the top-notch San Francisco restaurant scene

By [Tom Sietsema](#), Published: February 6

Picture a round bronzed pastry shaped from bread dough and showered with sugar. Imagine biting into the confection, rich with butter in its many layers, and watching the roll shatter into a thousand sweet flakes.

You are eating kouign amann (say queen-ya-mahn), a delicacy from Brittany, but you are far from France. The source of this exquisite \$4 pleasure: the year-old **b. patisserie** in San Francisco.

The “b” refers to Belinda Leong, the Bay Area pastry chef best known for her desserts at the esteemed Manresa in Los Gatos and Gary Danko in San Francisco. Kouign amann is one of many reasons to drop in at her bakery in the neighborhood of Pacific Heights. The shop’s croissants rival the best in Paris.

Similar epiphanies occurred almost everywhere I ate during a winter visit to a city I used to call home and still miss.

For old times’ sake, I ordered the iconic lunch-only hamburger on rosemary focaccia at **Zuni Cafe** on Market Street and dropped into **Original Joe’s** on Union Street for a strapping Thursday special of corned beef and cabbage washed down with a Manhattan that cost \$6 but tasted twice the price.

In search of trends, I checked out the fire-friendly **TBD** in SoMa (South of Market), which arranges its dishes under categories including “smoked” and “hearth + embers,” and I sipped superior cocktails at the warehouse-y **Trick Dog** in the Mission District, where customers select their drinks from a sliding horoscope wheel. (This Pisces discovered that he would prefer to sip like a Libra; tequila bested white rum, in other words.)

Everywhere I went around town and beyond, I learned something. But I fell most for the following:

Britain meets San Francisco

New Zealand native Anna Weinberg co-owns two of San Francisco’s most popular restaurants, Marlowe in SoMa and Park Tavern in North Beach. Both are American in flavor. When she and her husband, financier James Nicholas, decided to roll out a third place to eat, they opted to switch accents. “I didn’t want to do the same thing over again,” says Weinberg.



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The couple settled on a British theme in a hotel near the Westfield San Francisco Centre and enlisted Jennifer Puccio as their chef and business partner. The food would be the sort that Weinberg grew up on, but “done well,” she says. “My mother was a horrible cook.” As for the location in Hotel Zetta, “people said we were crazy.” The building had housed a string of misses, most recently a Thai restaurant where the owner slept behind the bar.

The Cavalier, introduced last August, is a welcome departure from San Francisco minimalism and a tribute to British design. The restaurant’s 145 seats are spread across four rooms, each with a distinct personality. One room conjures a railroad car, with brass luggage racks for stowing shopping bags and coats; another area, dressed with barn doors and called the Wine Stables, brings fox hunting to life via its wallpaper. A tip of the bowler to Ken Fulk, who managed to re-create scenes from across the pond without making the restaurant and bar feel like a theme park for Anglophiles.

In the crowd: a lively mix of the social set and Silicon Valley types. (Dropbox, Square and Twitter all have offices nearby.)

As for the menu, I can’t recall eating better, or bigger, Scotch eggs. Puccio uses duck eggs instead of the usual chicken eggs and wraps them in duck confit rather than the usual sausage. Welsh rarebit is a traditional plowman’s lunch of toasted bread and cheese sauce; while tapping into those comforting flavors, the chef elevates the presentation by turning the straightforward dish into a rich soufflé. A San Francisco touch surfaces in almost every dish. For her light fish and chips, Puccio uses local petrale sole.

The lone stodgy moment in an otherwise veddy good dinner was steak and oyster pie. Somewhere, a boarding school was calling it back.

Weinberg refers to the food at Cavalier as “a love letter to me from Jennifer,” but anyone who eats here is likely to feel pampered by the kitchen (and the servers, as smart and friendly a bunch as I encountered throughout my visit).

The Cavalier oozes sophistication, yet the name turns out to be an inside joke. When she was a youth back in Auckland, says Weinberg, Cavalier was the local dive bar — “a tavern before taverns were chic.”

360 Jessie St., San Francisco; 415-321-6000. thecavaliersf.com. Dinner entrees, \$16 to \$32.

A looker in St. Helena

After opening its doors in Napa Valley in the summer of 2012, the breezy **French Blue** got raves for its looks. No less a publication than Architectural Digest hailed it as one of the “10 most beautifully designed new restaurants,” a shout-out that must have tickled its co-owner, noted California winery designer Howard Backen.

Some food scribes, on the other hand, were less than thrilled with the menu, which included breakfast served all day. While he found the interior “stunning,” Michael Bauer of the San Francisco Chronicle deemed the experience “unfocused and ultimately unsatisfying.”

So why am I sharing this in a Valentine to my old stomping ground? Because French Blue is under new management — the nearby Solage Calistoga, part of Auberge Resorts, which installed fresh talent in the open kitchen: Ryder Zetts, a Wisconsin native who has worked around the country, including as a cook for two years at Virginia’s Inn at Little Washington.

The changes mean that there are more than skylights and rafters, clean lines and creamy palette, to draw customers. A companion and I were happy to sit at the curved granite counter framing the kitchen, where we were served by a third-generation bartender with the last name Martini (for real) and chatted up the genial Zetts (anonymously) between orders.

The guy makes a mean mushroom soup. Pureed creminis enriched with parsnip cream float delicate fritters shaped from roasted garlic, parsley and Parmesan, orbs that are then fried to a crisp in beer batter. Slurp. Crunch. *Gone.*

Like a lot of American chefs, Zetts shops the world for inspiration. Asian-style steamed buns slicked with dried-plum sauce and stuffed with Sonoma duck confit is a good dish by itself, better for the scoop of dirty rice, meaty

with sauteed duck liver, on the plate. Designer lamb stuffed into garlic naan and served with tzatziki is a gyro of finesse. The chef's twist on chips and dip is novel and oh-so-California: baby carrots dusted in pretzel crumbs and served with a "ranch" dressing of tangy yogurt and black onion seeds.

Happy hour is billed as 5 for 5 at 5. Drinks and snacks are all \$5, and the "drinking buddies" run to (five) oysters on the half shell and smoked salmon stogies. The latter are a joke: "cigars" of thinly shaved rye bread wrapped around puréed smoked salmon and crème fraîche. One tip, the "lit" end, glistens red with trout roe. The stogies are served in ashtrays, complete with "ashes" whipped up from fried capers.

In the very near future, the owners, who include the architect Backen, plan to change the name of their restaurant to distance themselves from the early lackluster food press. Should you find yourself hungry for something good in a pretty package in St. Helena, ask not for French Blue, but for **Archetype**.

1429 Main St., St. Helena; 707-968-9200. frenchbluenapa.com. Dinner entrees, \$23 to \$32.

Now *that's* Italian!

What's new at **Tosca Cafe**, a 94-year-old dowager in North Beach, is not the jukebox that plays opera or the linoleum tile floor or the 1938 mural of Venice that dominates the rear wall.

What's new, and noteworthy, is the chef behind the open kitchen. April Bloomfield, she of John Dory and Spotted Pig acclaim in New York, is not only roasting a stellar chicken for two and perching it on a salad of toasted, juice-sopped bread spread with ricotta. She's also reviving a local bar legend that hosted celebrities such as Rudolf Nureyev and Sean Penn over the decades and let patrons light up in its backroom long after no-smoking laws were in place: Until Bloomfield and business partner Ken Friedman came along, Tosca Cafe, threatened with an eviction notice in 2012 for not paying rent, hadn't served an actual meal since the late 1950s.

Bloomfield is no interloper; her ties to the Bay Area include cooking at Chez Panisse in Berkeley. That helps explain the beautiful simplicity of the blue cheese salad and the potatoes fried with pork fat and garlic, and the light touch she applies to even the weightier-sounding antipasti, such as oxtail terrine and pressed pig's ear.

Gemelli with black pepper and pecorino sounds basic. Bloomfield shows takers how much joy can be coaxed from just a few good ingredients. Burnt orange gelato makes a sensible, and sensuous, ending.

Bloomfield and Friedman poured \$1.5 million into restoring Tosca. Red leather has replaced red vinyl, and the antique cappuccino machine sports a new interior. The historic preservation did the job of a proper facelift. The new-old Tosca positively glows.

242 Columbus Ave., San Francisco; 415-986-9651. toscacafesf.com. Dinner entrees, \$29 to \$42.

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