

Foreign Cinema

Artistic Elegance

BY RICH HIGGINS

Dining at Foreign Cinema is an experience both timeless and contemporary, fantastical and fantastic. To walk into the restaurant is to make a lavish entrance — think Liz and Dick, Warren and Annette — as a long, wide corridor transports you from the hubbub of Mission Street into an airy, stylish speakeasy of film, cuisine, and taste. While most restaurants in San Francisco must crowd their space by converting utility closets into bathrooms and wall space into glassware storage, Foreign Cinema lavishes on its guests its large foyer, expansive wall space, and chateau fireplace. In one half of the restaurant, the Mission District's notably fog-free night sky is the backdrop for the stars of foreign and art-house cinema — true to its name, Foreign Cinema shows films nightly (soundtrack optional on tableside speakers). The service is crisp, professional, and confident, inviting guests to relax and revel in the gilded — almost guilty — pleasures of the space and the cuisine.

The food is conceived by chefs Gayle Pirie and John Clark, who bring Zuni Café and Chez Panisse pedigree to the sourcing and cooking of sustainable ingredients. Each dish is thoughtful and artistic, with nods to French, Italian, Moroccan, and Japanese cuisines. My guest and I started the evening with a glass of apple-y, earthy Le Russeghine pigato from Liguria (\$9) and the "Notorious" (\$10), a cocktail of London dry gin, sweet vermouth, Luxardo, and lemon. Both were crisp, acidic, tasty aperitifs.

We were pleasantly surprised when the server quickly returned with amuses-bouche. They set the scene for the dinner to follow: Crisp watermelon-radish halves, perfectly in season, were topped with a tricolor garnish of orange tobiko, green wasabi caviar, and crème fraîche. A little chili oil accented the radish's kick.

For an appetizer, we loved the farmer cheese with toast and greens (\$10). It topped grilled



» **Foreign Cinema**
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Open daily at 11:00 a.m.



sourdough bread, wilted escarole, and roasted garlic with a blanket of dense Cowgirl Creamery farmer cheese. The cheese was blistered in spots from the broiler and was drizzled with olive oil and sprinkled with fleur de sel. It was a simple, wholly satisfying dish.

We also enjoyed the salt cod brandade (\$11), which came baked in a small crock, to be spread on bread. It was a beautifully briny dish, full of the flavor of the fish. We enjoyed its crisp breadcrumb top and fluffy whipped potatoes. It came with a side of spicy pickled peppers, which were great on their own, but competed with the rich, briny brandade.

The wild king-salmon sashimi (\$12) was excellent, and was as graceful and poignant as the brandade had been earthy and rich. The slices of tangerine-fleshed fish were fresh, lithe, and subtly sweet. They honored both the fish and the sea, an invigorating alternative to the cold, flabby, pallid salmon that makes me an infrequent *shake* eater. I savored it with a Pranzster from North Coast Brewing Co. (\$6), a golden Belgian-style ale whose vanilla, apricot, and mint notes accented both the fish and its accompanying parsley and fennel salad perfectly.

I was influenced by the French film playing in the background, the black-and-white scenes of Paris putting me in the mood for steak frites. The bavette steak (\$27) was tender and had an addicting, almost candy-like sweetness. The cocoa-nib rub had flavored the outside of the steak, dissolved into the buttery pan sauce, and was soaked up by the crispy potato wedges.

The main dishes are largely meat- or sea-

food-focused, each listed with sides of grains and vegetables that sounded delicious. The menu also offers a vegetarian main course of the chef's whim (\$21). The night we dined, it was an enjoyable — if a bit hodgepodge — selection of the vegetarian sides of many of the main dishes. Seared maitake mushrooms nestled atop a pile of ruby roasted beets and glazed turnips, and bitter, mineraly broccoli rabe cut through the buttery, green, herbed polenta. Unfortunately, the crostino with tapenade and the hummus were out of place and a bit oversalted; the dish would have been better and more focused without them. Aside from that, the meal was nearly flawless.

We ended the decadent meal with a dessert of moist, springy vanilla cake topped with pickled rhubarb and whipped cream (\$8). Caramelized pecans and a dark-red rhubarb gastrique decorated the plate. We didn't think we had room for it, but before we knew it, we were contentedly scraping up the last bits of it with our forks.

Foreign Cinema is a transcendent dining experience, physically and emotionally removing guests from the urban landscape to a stylish, arty sanctuary that is part industrial chic and part organic rusticity. The restaurant's passion and professionalism create cuisine that is self-respecting, adventurous, and utterly delicious. 🍴

Rich Higgins, brewmaster at San Francisco's Social Kitchen & Brewery, is also a foodie and a cicerone, pairing great beer and great food wherever he goes. Contact him at richhiggins.com.