

Millennium: Seriously Humble

BY RICH HIGGINS

The Bay Area is nationally recognized as a hot spot for self-reflection, revolutions, and fads. Its residents are known as hippies, natural, healthy, vegetarians, and fair trade fanatics. Seldom are they considered to be humorous and fun. The ability to laugh at ourselves is important. It's an act of humility and an admission that the road to perfection is a long one.

This humorless appraisal may not be too far off the mark when considering the Bay Area's fine dining scene. Nice restaurants here are extremely dedicated to respect for agriculture, *terroir*, and process, and they are very serious in their mission to sell food that is pure, perfect, and precious. These are noble traits, but I wonder if the results are just a bit out of touch. Where's that human and communal element of fun, the frivolity that simultaneously bespeaks humility and self-respect?

Well, I found that it is safe and sound at Millennium Restaurant. Millennium and its executive chef, Eric Tucker, offer a fantastic dining experience, one that emboldens Bay Area's stereotypes while garnishing them generously with fun. Late last month, I attended Millennium's Annual Chile Dinner, a five-course, prix fixe dinner priced at \$60, plus \$18 for beer pairings. The dinner's theme — locally grown chiles from Tierra Vegetables, harvested at their crisp, sweet, spicy peak by Millennium's restaurant staff — is a perfect symbiosis of Millennium's serious-humorous niche within the Bay Area's fine dining culture. With Chef Tucker at the helm, Millennium opened in 1994 in the Union Square hotel and theater district, and has been pioneering fearless avant-garde cuisine ever since. I commonly hear its cooking dismissed as vegetarian, when in fact it dedicates itself to so much more: haute, local, organic, healthy, and vegan. This isn't just dinner; it's methodical, dedicated cuisine, and it's prepared by a committed, tongue-in-cheek,



slightly kooky artist. Tucker is out to "dispel the stereotypes and misconceptions held by many about low-fat and vegan cuisine."

Tucker claims the inspiration for his chile dinner was cutting his "very first baby tooth on a jalapeño popper." On his menu were three "Hot Sauces of DOOM!": "The Inquisition," with grilled peach and gold cayenne; the "Fist of Dobrin," with smoked anaheims and charred tomato, and my companion's and my favorite, the smoky, molé-like "Black Death," with charred chile arbol and shallot.

The meal triumphed across ethnic boundaries, inspired by chiles from across the globe. We started with an amuse of seared lipstick peppers and jalapeño jam with cornbread. The vibrant red peppers were super-sweet and caramelized from the searing. From there, we moved on to a trio of ceviches, including a hearts of palm ceviche with avocado, tomato, and aji chile; a button mushroom ceviche in leche de tigre; and a king trumpet ceviche with thai chiles and coconut milk. While these ceviches lacked the hallmark texture and sea flavor of acid-cooked fish,

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each had a wide range of excellent flavors. And frankly, after gnawing through too many tough, overwrought fish ceviches in the past, these were a delightful interplay of snappy texture, bright flavor, and earthy undertones. Paired with Russian River Brewing Company's citrusy and piney Blind Pig IPA — which brightened the aromatics of the ceviches — the course was vibrant and exciting.

I'm a snob for Thai curry flavors, and after several underwhelming from-scratch attempts at home, I know how difficult it is to achieve that ethereal balance of sweet, sour, herbal, floral, and unctuous heat. With the Thai red curry in his next course, Tucker succeeded where I (and many restaurants) have failed. The centerpiece in this perfect curry

Millennium
Executive Chef
Eric Tucker



was a banana leaf-wrapped jasmine green rice tamale, filled with just the right grainy, herby, salty rice to complement the curry and soak up its goodness. Caramelized pineapple "chops" and crunchy baby bok choy added a pleasing textural counterpoint. San Francisco's own ThirstyBear Brewing Company's organic Golden Vanilla beer was a natural pairing with this course, its dryness cutting through the richness of the curry and its vanilla aromatics complementing the dish's heady spices.

The next course was one feared by many vegetarians and meat-eaters alike: the faux-meat dish. Centuries of grinding sausage, reducing ragùs, aging cheese, and using eggs to achieve silken pasta texture gave way to smoked tempeh "sausage," sweet pepper and fennel ragù, and potato and "cheese" borsetti (a type of ravioli, I found out). This dish was fantastic, and Tucker succeeded in pleasing both my cheese-loving, vegetarian companion as well as the omnivore in me. (I admit that the pasta could have been a touch more al dente, but the soft, slightly grainy texture may have been similar

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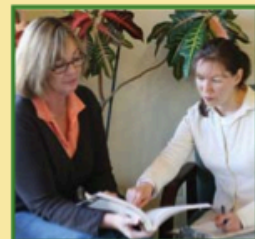


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to the way Italian pasta was in the Renaissance, before eggs were a common pasta ingredient.) For this course, Tucker chose a beer that was a transposition of the food's flavors in beer form: The complex bready, peppery, and earthy notes of The Bruery's Saison Rue were beautiful reflections of the dish.

In the next course, the toothsome poori were fried till puffed and golden, and they begged to be eaten by hand, stuffed with the spinach and green chile saag, tofu "paneer," and pumpkin chana masala. The combination was delicious, aromatic, and spicy, and our forks were reserved for duty on the cooling melon salad with mint. ThirstyBear's organic Meyer ESB complemented the food with hints of caramel, cashews, black pepper, and bitter orange, and its smooth carbonation mimicked the richness of the saag.

The incredible meal marched on to its final course. Despite full stomachs, we managed a few bites of the lovely dessert: mulato chile chocolate ganache cake with a smoked caramel cream filling, nestled on a bed of sweet strawberry and crimson lee chile relish. The accompanying Mexican hot chocolate ice cream stole the show, though, coating and cooling my palate while massaging it with gentle grace notes of chile heat. The Beast, a full-bodied beer from Avery Brewing Company, had enough caramelly residual sugar to echo the sweetness of the dish, and its high alcohol content pleasantly warmed the chiles. The Beast's bark was worse than its bite, and it was a soothing digestif after a big meal.

Millennium is spacious but inviting, with warm, red drapery hanging from the high ceilings and artful photographs of farm produce covering the painted walls. Our server was extremely friendly, helpful, and informed, and the efficient service team kept the meal flowing at a comfortable pace. Throughout the evening, we felt comforted by the ambiance and service.

The Annual Chile Dinner perfected, Millennium offers similar dinners and events throughout the year, with a range of themes like Winemakers, Aphrodisiacs, Frugal Foodie, and monthly "Convert a Carnivore" dinners. With the culinary imagination and execution of Chef Eric Tucker, Millennium has carved a refreshing niche in the Bay Area dining scene. The restaurant is fanatical about offering precise, dedicated cuisine that is inspired by a sense of fun and humility. Millennium is a true Bay Area gem.

Rich Higgins is a foodie, brewer, and cicerone, and he pairs great beer with great food wherever he goes. Contact him at richhiggins.com.

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