

# Datebook

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## DINING OUT

### Le Club

# Spectacular, Old World Dining

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CHRONICLE RESTAURANT CRITIC

**M**ENTION Le Club, the posh dining room hidden away in a Nob Hill apartment house, and recollections of pommes soufflés, rack of lamb, and personalized match books flood the memory of any self-respecting San Francisco bon vivant.

Le Club started as a private club in 1947, but went public 20 years later with a then fashionable bordellos-style red damask and crystal chandelier decor. Politicos and Nob Hill nabobs rubbed elbows with boulevardiers over intimate Continental dinners. Now, in its third incarnation, Le Club may have achieved its highest level.

The house is in the hands of one of the city's warmest and most sophisticated old world maitre d's, Fritz Frankel. The kitchen thrives under the direction of Lisa Cannelora, a young chef with international and local credentials, and the dining rooms have been lovingly refurbished in the spirit of the original place. All the resonance and cachet remains; only fabrics, colors and finishes have been updated. The new Le Club gives San Francisco a chic, intimate, top-end room, just the kind of restaurant missing in our restaurant galaxy.

For about \$50 a person, you can feel like one of those Nob Hill nabobs, cosseted by professional waiters in tuxedos, surrounded by a jewel box of dark African mahogany and silvery antique velvet. Everyone looks their best in soft, flattering light emanating from pleated silk lamp shades and gold leaf wall sconces.

Reached from the small lobby

#### Le Club

1250 Jones Street (at Clay), San Francisco. (415) 771-5400.

Open Tuesday through Saturday from 6 to 10 p.m. Full bar. All major credit cards. Reservations accepted.

OVERALL	★ ★ ★
Food	★ ★ ★
Service	★ ★ ★
Atmosphere	★ ★ ★ ★

PRICES \$\$\$\$

**PLUSES** A chic, intimate, top-end dining room with gracious Old World service and delicious, modern food of a Franco/Italian bent.

**MINUSES** Not enough interesting bottles on the wine list.

#### RATINGS KEY

★ ★ ★ ★ Extraordinary    ★ ★ ★ Excellent  
★ ★ ★ Very good    ★ Good    □ Fair

(\$) Inexpensive; entrees under \$7, (\$\$) Moderate; \$7-\$14, (\$\$\$) Expensive; \$15-\$20, (\$\$\$\$) Very Expensive; more than \$20

of a noble art deco apartment house, the dining rooms come as a complete surprise. You would never know a restaurant was hidden there. You enter through a glass door that reveals only a smart vase of flowers, into a tiny, clubby bar room (a cocktail lover's dream) with eight stools in front of a gorgeous mahogany bar.

In fact, the two tiny dining rooms are paneled in this dark, burnished wood with claret-colored carpeting and soft claret-colored banquettes. Every window is kept tightly shuttered. Le Club creates its own environment.

Maitre d' Frankel takes over

the minute you enter. Though match books with your name pressed into them are not waiting on your table, Frankel makes everyone feel like a much-anticipated guest.

The kitchen also does, sending out crisp wafers of puff pastry dabbed with a bit of creamy herbéd goat cheese to tide you over while you read the menu and wine list. Eight or so appetizers and a like number of main courses seem just right for a restaurant of this size, and frankly, every dish I tasted was well thought out and carefully executed.

A warm asparagus and goat cheese tart (\$6.50), rich, tender, infused with the flavor of asparagus, came with a salad of spring greens — a great dish. Artichoke soup (\$6.75) actually captured the elusive flavor of artichokes in a puree with tomatoes, crowned with a grilled scallop. Some first-rate smoked salmon (\$8), velvety in texture, was generously draped on airy blini on a plate dotted with little piles of capers, onions and creme fraiche.

Chef Cannelora, who spent several years in Italy as one of Lorenza de Medici's assistants at her Tuscan cooking school, returned with the inspiration that food should taste like itself. An artichoke soup should capture artichokes; an asparagus tart should taste like asparagus. Though her dishes are quite fancy and refined, which fits this venue, they are not a forced jumble of novel combinations. The dishes have fresh, bright flavor and a focus. They make culinary sense.

A fine example of uncluttered vision was a special of duck breast paired with just warmed-through

peaches and raspberries (\$22). Though it could have been more like dessert than dinner, the dish was delicious. The juices from the fresh fruit added a bit of sweetness to a clean, savory jus. Another coup was a singular scallop dish (\$19.50), serving them with sugar snap peas, cream sauce dotted with crunchy fish roe, and scalloped potatoes. Though very rich, each flavor was distinct and complemented the main ingredient, the gently grilled scallops.

Some simpler dishes also shone, such as a roasted poussin (\$18.50) on a bed of huge, creamy white beans and artichokes topped with gremolata, an aromatic sauce of chopped parsley, garlic, lemon peel and olive oil. Three rack of lamb chops (\$21.50) went nicely with authentic, thick, almost chewy polenta and a spring vegetable ragout of carrots, peas and beans. An appetizer of chilled ginger-marinated shrimp (\$7.75), with a julienned carrot and jicama salad, gave one meal a sparkling, refreshing start. A vinegary baby spinach and mizuna salad (\$6.50), balanced with caramelized walnuts and dollops of strong, creamy Gorgonzola, also woke up the palate without killing it.

The wine list is on the pricey side but not terribly interesting. The composition of that list could use some further attention. Le Club might be the very place

where a small cellar of great older wines could be viable. Certainly some reasonable Italian and French wines in lieu of some of the expensive California reds would be welcome.

**T**HE CHEF must have learned how to make granite (\$5.50), or fresh fruit ices, straight from the source, Italy, because hers sing with pure fresh fruit flavor. A crystal glass with three different flavors and tiny butter cookies end a meal on the very highest note. Another lovely dessert offers delicate tulip-shaped Florentines filled with strawberry-rhubarb granite (\$5.50) on a plate scattered with diced fresh strawberries. Superb. Vanilla creme brûlée (\$5.50) and warm chocolate hazelnut pudding (\$5.50), an ethereal chocolate cake that melts in your mouth, both sing.

Not often does a formal dining room live up to its pretensions, but Le Club does, with an ease and graciousness. The stiff ordeal of a fancy night out simply does not happen here. Le Club is a club that welcomes everyone. ■