

SAN FRANCISCO FOCUS

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Nob Hill Haute for the Nineties

Le Club, a survivor of the sixties, gets a new look and a vibrant new life.

Twenty-five years ago, when I started writing about restaurants, superchefs had not yet replaced rock stars as icons of the day. Baby boomers were still more interested in political activism than in goat cheese and arugula. And far from the fringes of Haight Street, where the flower children were making national headlines, San Francisco foodies (then called "gourmets") were getting high on haute cuisine. A culinary mecca was Nob Hill. There, in the splendor of gustatory palaces such as the long-gone Alexis and L'Etoile, waiters and captains wore tuxedos, and patrons feasted on the likes of blini and beluga, tournedos Rossini, and crêpes suzette.

The culinary revolution of the seventies, the rise and fall of nouvelle cuisine, and the health consciousness of the eighties took their toll on haute cuisine. Many of the old-timers closed. Others, such as Ernie's and Fleur de Lys, embraced a more contemporary style. But in the Clay-Jones Apartments on the crest of Nob Hill, Le Club survived in a time warp—until early this year.

Now new owners, a new chef, and a new decor have produced stunning results. The exquisite aura of the intimate dining room evokes the elegance of the sixties, but the dazzling Mediterranean-French cooking of thirty-three-year-old chef Lisa Cannelora is on the cutting edge of the nineties. I predict she will become one of the superstars of the decade.

But first the setting. Le Club was started as a private club in 1947 and opened to the public twenty years later. The new interior (designed by Frost-Tsuji Architects, who also did Aqua) retains the original African mahogany paneling, but the dated red damask insets and crystal chandeliers have been replaced with striped beige velvet, gold-leafed wall sconces, and antique beveled black glass from France. ed black glass from France.

In yet another round of déjà vu, familiar faces greeted us: Fritz Frankel (former owner of Le

Castel and one of this city's most accomplished maître d's) is now manager, and Martin Wendel (former owner of L'Escargot) captains the formally attired wait staff. As expected from these pros, the service was impeccable.

Two kinds of homemade bread were provided with butter and a zesty tapenade for spreading. Then, compliments of the chef, a lovely little hors d'oeuvre of goat cheese and wild mushrooms in puff pastry arrived. But the biggest surprise was the menu: The dishes and pairings promised a refreshing originality. And the prices (while not exactly circa 1968, when entrées at Alexis peaked at \$8.25) are quite reasonable for a restaurant of this genre. You can easily put together a three-course dinner for about \$30 (food only).

Cannelora's stellar background shines through her cooking. She was a sous chef at Campton Place and studied for a year with Lorenza de' Medici in Tuscany. Let us not forget that it was another Medici, Catherine, who put the haute in French cuisine. The young Florentine bride of Henry II brought to France a barrage of Italian chefs and pastry makers along with such delicacies as sweetbreads, truffles, and quenelles. As queen, she also shocked her Gallic subjects with her shameless passion for artichokes—considered a potent aphrodisiac in the sixteenth century.

Indeed Le Club's new menu does offer artichokes—in a soup with seared Nantucket scallops. Chef Cannelora acknowledges the Spanish influence on haute cuisine with a truly original appetizer of a delicate asparagus flan atop a warm salad of wild mushrooms and colorful lettuces. My favorite starter, however, was an earthy ragout of rabbit, red wine, caramel-

ized onions, and raisins in a hazelnut tart shell on a bed of baby greens.

Choosing an entrée is a tough call—rack of lamb with creamy polenta, grilled New York steak with herbed Gorgonzola, veal paillard with caramelized red onions and wild-rice risotto. All sounded appealing. But I was wooed and wowed by the roast quail: Two boned birds, stuffed with a garlicky, turmeric-flavored couscous, were encircled with a festive mélange of tomatoes, summer squash, fava beans, and spring garlic. Another masterpiece is Cannelora's rendition of grilled sea scallops; the sweet mollusks are perched on a gratin of leeks and potatoes, crowned with golden caviar and deep-fried ginger, and sauced with a ginger vinaigrette flecked with red caviar.

The indefatigable Cannelora even makes her own breads and pastries. (She once worked at Acme Bread.) Absolutely intriguing are her "Spring Tuiles," little tulip-shaped baskets of ground, caramelized nuts filled with strawberry-rhubarb sorbet and flaunting a garnish of fresh strawberries. But the dessert to bring back the dead is the warm, chocolate-hazelnut steamed pudding, so light that it seems to float on its sea of crème anglaise with rivulets of orange and papaya purées. Surely the estimable pastry chefs of the Medicis turn in their graves in envy. *Le Club, 1250 Jones St, SF (415) 771-5400. Dinner Tues-Sat. Appetizers \$5.75-\$8, entrées \$17-\$21.50. Major credit cards.*