

# FOOD SCENE

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## Loco for Hot Cocoa

Cure the cold-weather blues with a sweet treat from Berkeley's Casa de Chocolates.

BY ALEJANDRA SARAGOZA

One of the best things about chilly winter days is curling up on the couch with a soft blanket and a mug of rich, velvety, perfectly sweet hot chocolate. But don't settle for Swiss Miss when you can indulge in a top-notch cup of cocoa—with a spicy twist—from Casa de Chocolates.

Located on Berkeley's bustling Ashby Avenue, the small-yet-festive shop specializes in artisanal chocolates but is also famous for its steaming cups of decadent Mexican hot cocoa. And for those feeling adventurous, there's a spiced-up variety of the familiar favorite: In addition to the traditional ingredients—such as Mexican cocoa nibs, milk, and *canela* (cinnamon)—the piquant version is spiked with chile de árbol. The drink begins on a sweet note, offering the usual flavors of chocolate with cinnamon and sugar-infused milk. But soon after you savor your first sip, the strong bite of chile hits your palate, adding a pleasantly zesty kick that's bound to warm you up real quick.

Before you leave with your piping hot beverage, purchase another treat for later. Casa de Chocolates offers unique bonbons (including mescal and *sal de gusano*, coconut caramel, and Inca peanut butter) and chocolate bars (think savory mole, spicy-sweet chile mango, and cardamom-laced *café de la olla*) that highlight Latin American flavors. These sweet goods are sure to satisfy when your last sip of Mexican hot cocoa is gone. [casadechocolates.com](http://casadechocolates.com).





REVIEW

# Pour It On

The next-generation bar and lounge CDP makes casual dining fun—and instructive.

BY NICHOLAS BOER

**P**rior to mid-October, a meal from the kitchen at Commis required a commitment to eating eight courses and spending \$165 (plus \$85 for wine pairings). At CDP, Commis' new bar and lounge, phenomenal appetizers, signature

cocktails, and select wines by the glass can be had for \$10-\$15 each. These prices are industry standard, but the quality here is anything but: Commis carries two Michelin stars; no other East Bay restaurant has so much as one.

So it almost felt like shoplifting when I slipped into CDP (short for "chef de partie") on a recent evening. The 26-seat bar and lounge feeds into the 24-seat dining room but has its own entrance. The intimate space, imagined by chef-owner James Syhabout, opens to a clean-lined, white marble bar and telegraphs the good life with its soft tones, textured far wall, and lights both pragmatic (overhead spot lighting) and whimsical (dandelion "chandeliers").

While no ordering strategy is required, sommelier and beverage director Mark Guillaudeu recommends settling in with some almonds or olives, and a cocktail—or something bubbly—"before you get serious."

Wanting to try as many plates as possible, I dove right in. A mousseline of hen liver arrived coyly in pâte à choux: mini cream puffs that appeared dainty but exploded with silky sweetness. A slightly effervescent Pinot Noir rosé made for a combo both stimulating and luxurious.

Syhabout's beef tartare—full-flavored diced rib eye spiked with capers, chervil, and a creamy tarragon emulsion—was simply extraordinary when scooped up with crisp shards of lavash (the dough bound with beef fat) and paired well with a lush floral blend of Pinot Noir and Gamay from Châteaumeillant, France.

The staff here is as disarming as it is professional—both invisible and always at hand. The bartender, who automatically offers tastes before pouring a glass, helped steer my choices. Each dish was delivered by a lightly stubbled sous chef who, without actually saying, "I cooked this just for you," conveyed uncommon hospitality by describing the creations in as much detail as I craved.

That's how I anonymously discovered my generous slab of country-style pâté was made from pork shoulder and liver, enhanced with warm spice, cooked until just set, and firmly pressed. Served with several toasty slices of fine-crumbed pain de mie with violet mustard, the \$13 dish was a revelation. I've invested several times in the prix fixe menu at Commis, and found each course to be masterly but often

esoteric and sometimes confused. The pâté at CDP, served with a \$14 glass of New York Cabernet Franc (a wine Guillaudeu calls an unsung hero: "Cabernet Sauvignon without the ponderousness"), was wholly satisfying.

With caviar service and Commis' world-class list of sparkling wines and brandies, CDP can be as expensive as you like (although ordering a \$60 glass of champagne is a thrifty alternative to a \$300 bottle). But for just \$13, you can also experience Syhabout's signature dish: Served in an earthen bowl, it consists of three warm, custardy elements—Medjool date puree, creamy onion soup pooled to mimic an egg white, and a precisely poached, farm-fresh yolk—with puffed wild rice to provide some chew.

Enjoyed with a glass of true Chablis, and perhaps an order of house-made levain, this meal at CDP epitomizes what's offered by the next generation of gourmet wine bars: a transcendent experience—snappy or sustained—made to order.

3859 Piedmont Ave., Oakland, (510) 653-3902, [commisrestaurant.com](http://commisrestaurant.com). Dinner Wed.-Sun.



VANESSA YAP-EINBUND



VANESSA YAP-EINBUND



Opposite page: Hen liver mousseline in choux pastry. This page, clockwise from top left: Beef tartare with herbs and lavash crackers; a Vieux Carré cocktail; the bar at CDP.



## Pick a Glass

Mark Guillaudeu took over as beverage director of Commis and CDP when the lounge opened in October. When not working, he's usually taking classes or studying wine. Here are a few of his tips for selecting a vintage.

**"Put yourself in the hands of the bartender."** Ordering at a modern wine bar should be a treasure hunt. Consider your appetite, scan the list and menu, and ask for tastes. You'll have the most luck, Guillaudeu says, ordering something the bartender is excited about.

**"What do you like to drink at home?"** You don't need a deep wine vocabulary to convey what you do and don't like. Are you in the mood for red, white, rosé, or sparkling? Name a bottle or style that made an impression, and let the conversation roll.

**"Aim for harmonic rather than symphonic."** When pairing with food, imagine what grape attribute might best cleanse your palate of the dominant component of the dish. For instance, a fruit-forward wine works for a meaty pâté; seek out something crisp and citrusy to go with a rich dish.



ROUNDUP

## Ring in Seafood Season

East Bay seafood restaurants serve up classic dishes with contemporary twists.

BY JESSIE FETTERLING

### COCKTAILS WITH A SIDE OF SHRIMP

Spenger's Fresh Fish Grotto still prepares the traditional seafood that made it a Berkeley institution decades ago, but now it has a swanky new bar to attract fresh-faced folk.

Renamed Bar 19, the renovated space debuted in late October with an innovative craft cocktail menu of 15 specialty drinks—curated with help from David Nepove, national president of the United States Bartenders' Guild. One must-try addition: Liquid Intelligence, an orange martini made with cloves, spices, and gin from the New York Distilling Company.

To accompany the creative spirits, Spenger's culinary team had some fun creating a menu of food pairings. The mango habanero popcorn shrimp, for example, is the yin to the Liquid Intelligence yang.

The bar's happy hour runs seven days a week from 4 to 9 p.m., and locals won't want to miss the restaurant's resident musician, Jose Angel Gonzalez—aka Mr. Extremo—who creates Carlos Santana-esque sounds every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. 1919 Fourth St., Berkeley, (510) 845-7771, [mccormickandschmicks.com](http://mccormickandschmicks.com).

### JUST LIKE NONNA MAKES

In Crockett, overlooking the Carquinez Strait, The Dead Fish offers seafood dishes just like Grandma makes. The original chef's nonna often cooked for her big family in Italy, with little time to keep track of the recipes she prepared or even what dead fish she was cooking up at any given time.

The restaurant's expansive menu plays on the deceased theme, featuring items like The Dead Fish cioppino or the "Recently Demised" fish of the day, in addition to an

entire section dedicated to "Other Dead Things," such as seared filet mignon and prime rib.

But a crowd favorite this time of year is always Nonna's world-famous killer crab—an order of Dungeness crab that is guaranteed to weigh at least two pounds and is roasted in a secret garlic sauce. 20050 San Pablo Ave., Crockett, (510) 787-3323, [thedeadfish.com](http://thedeadfish.com).

### ALL ABOUT LOBSTAH

Walnut Creek Yacht Club (WCYC) brings back its annual January Lobster Month with a couple of new twists. The eatery will dish out its Lobster Special (along with regular menu items) from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 to 9 p.m. every day in January. The promotion is only available to WCYC loyalty members, but fortunately, you can sign up for free at the restaurant or online. That means there will be more opportunities for newcomers to try the restaurant's seasonal Dungeness crab alongside the popular cioppino.

For those who want to test their fish-cooking skills at home, WCYC's crab and seafood market makes it easy for landlocked residents to pick up fresh crab and even cioppino kits to create traditional dishes in the comfort of their own kitchens. 1555 Bonanza St., Walnut Creek, (925) 944-3474, [wcyc.net](http://wcyc.net).



The view from the patio at The Dead Fish in Crockett.

MISHA BRUK



Nonna's world-famous killer crab.