

FOOD SCENE

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Spring Has Sprung

Chef Paul Magu of Lafayette's French mainstay Rêve Bistro ushers in the new season with fresh pea soup.

Forget that bag of frozen peas you may have stashed in your freezer and make fresh spring peas the star of your next dish with this recipe from Rêve Bistro's Paul Magu. The French chef insists that the fresher the legume, the sweeter and more delightful the soup. So get shelling.

SPRING PEA AND MINT SOUP

Yields 4 to 6 servings.

*2 pounds fresh peas, in the pods
½ yellow onion, diced
5 cups water
4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
3-4 mint leaves
Salt
Pepper*

Remove peas from the pods and place them in a bowl. (Keep the pods to use in the stock.) Over medium heat, drizzle olive oil in a 2-quart pot and add onions. Sweat the onions until translucent; do not let them brown. Add pea pods and water to the pot, bringing liquid to a boil for 15 minutes. Strain and chill vegetable broth until cold.

In a separate pot of boiling water, blanch the shelled peas for approximately 1½ minutes. Strain peas and transfer to a bowl of ice water for roughly 2 minutes. Drain well. In a blender, puree peas and strain to remove any pieces of skin. Put strained peas, chilled vegetable stock, oil, and mint leaves in the blender and combine. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

For an extra-special touch, top the soup with edible flowers or fresh crab, and season with lemon oil, salt, and pepper.



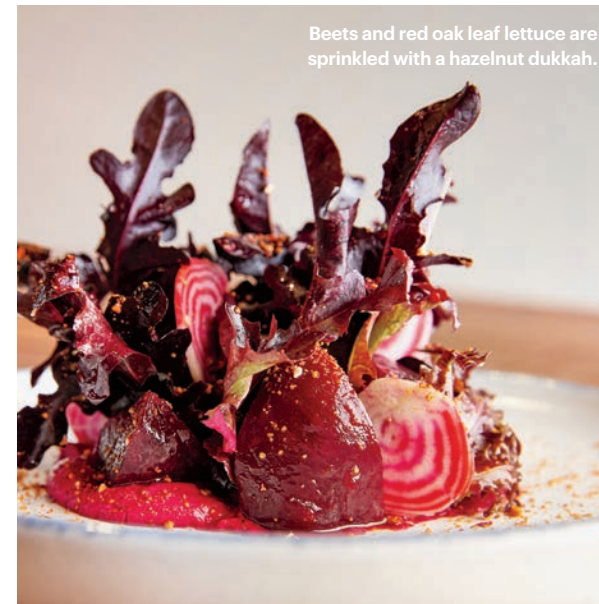
RESTAURANT REVIEW



Chef Brian Bowen changes the Albatross menu based on ingredient availability and the culinary team's imagination.



Roasted sweet potato nestles next to pork belly drizzled with a kumquat mostarda.



Beets and red oak leaf lettuce are sprinkled with a hazelnut dukkah.



A wreath of Persian cucumbers and sea grapes garnishes the top of the big-eye tuna crudo.

Excellence Takes Flight

Albatross in Danville is a rare bird indeed.

BY NICHOLAS BOER

No expense was spared in hatching Albatross, a Danville restaurant whose decor is as sleek as its namesake: a seabird that catches the air currents for hours without a single flap from its 11-foot wingspan—the longest of any living bird.

Happily, our sense of ease in the dining room, which was unveiled just a week prior to our first visit, matched the maritime bird's effortless flight. A weathered plank floor

and simple wood tables ground the airy space. However, the most luxurious napkins in the East Bay set a tone more gracious than casual (and echo the staff's long, striped bistro aprons).

The cuisine from the well-arranged kitchen soars, but the precise presentations and complexity of flavors belie the galley's relative calm. Executive chef Brian Bowen—whose CV includes three-Michelin-starred The Restaurant at Meadowood in St. Helena, as well as the

acclaimed Cavallo Point Lodge's Murray Circle in Sausalito—characterizes the prep work involved as not simply crazy but “insanely crazy.” (And this was before Albatross opened for brunch.)

Take Bowen's Spanish octopus, poached overnight with bay leaves and served with heirloom potatoes procured from the Saturday farmers market across the street on Railroad Avenue. The tiny spuds are smashed with soft

'nduja (an Italian-style spreadable salumi) then paired with fleshy, flash-grilled octopus draped with capers, chopped parsley, and lemon oil—all presented on a distinctive ceramic plate dotted with brilliant saffron aioli.

Slices of pristine *kampachi* are alternated on a platter with razor-thin slivers of green apple. A wealth of winter citrus—Cara Cara orange, oro blanco, and lime—conspires with bitter endive and fiery serrano to cut through the naturally fatty fish. Also true to the winter season (Albatross launched in December) is Bowen's loose chicken liver mousse, infused with juniper berry, brandy, and port, and aerated with homemade crème fraîche. It's well matched with grilled La Brea Bakery bread.

All this indulgence comes at a price: The dishes mentioned are small plates ranging from \$12 to \$24. Our \$38 Persian lamb ragù with too-crispy rice cake was the most

one-dimensional of the offerings we tasted—delicious to be sure, but we would've been as happy with a simple shank and potatoes.

Our only other complaint was the spaghetti *nero*, squid-ink pasta with shellfish. Spiked with herbs, it had wonderfully bright flavors, but the pasta itself was slightly gummy, as if cooked in not-quite-boiling water. We ordered this as an entrée on our second visit (it comes in two portion sizes), while sitting at the stately bar. The crab cake starter was stellar—packed with sweet meat—and delicate despite being deep-fried. We finished with lemon meringue “pie,” an immense parfait of curd and caramelized egg whites garnished with a coin of puff pastry. It was intensely rich, warranting only a few bites, and stood in stark contrast to pastry chef Andrea Morgan's complex and fascinating poached pear, which we sampled on our initial visit.

The service is reserved and above average, if not quite up to conveying the subtleties of the locally inspired global cuisine. The wine list, too, is a cut above—focusing on California vinos but with a serious nod to European bottles and even some Middle Eastern selections.

Mehrassa Bagheri, who is the owner of Primavera in San Ramon, devised the restaurant's stunning concept, underscored by its thick white marble bar. Bagheri's quiet presence lends grace, and she deserves kudos for investing so much in such a risky and burdensome business. Albatross' name alone might seem daunting. After all, the bird—at least the wandering albatross—lives some 50 years. We sincerely hope this Danville restaurant stays put and achieves the same.

312 Railroad Ave., Danville, (925) 718-5445, albatrossdanville.com. Brunch Fri.–Sun., dinner Tues.–Sun.

NADER KHOURI PHOTOGRAPHY

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KITCHEN HACKS

Eggs Five Ways

The breakfast staple is both easy to cook and easy to ruin. Local restaurateur Erin Andrews shares her tips on mastering the humble egg.

BY LAUREN BONNEY

“There’s pretty food, and then there’s beautiful food,” says Erin Andrews, owner of Sideboard Neighborhood Kitchen and Coffee Bar. Pretty food has a distinctive aesthetic appeal: a perfect, architecturally crafted dessert, for instance. Beautiful food, on the other hand, celebrates exquisite simplicity—such as a classic pie.

“Take a cloud egg, for example; that’s pretty food,” Andrews says, referring to the whipped-fluffy whites that are baked in a pile, then topped with yolks and finished in the oven. “Now, two poached eggs on toast? That’s beautiful.”

In her eateries, Andrews doesn’t mess around with anything overtly fancy. Instead, she lets the natural beauty of the ingredients shine through in her dishes.

Andrews—who operates two always-busy Sideboard restaurants in Danville and Lafayette—went to culinary school in Paris before using her classical training to create a style all her own. Here, she shares her expert tips and tricks for making eggcellent huevos five ways. sideboardkitchen.com.

THE BASICS

Before getting started, it’s important to keep in mind some ground rules. Eggs are all about time and attention; show them some love, and they’ll reward you in return. Next, when using a pan, it must be hot; crank that burner up to a cruising medium. Finally, it’s best to cook with room-temperature eggs. While Andrews uses eggs fresh from the fridge at her restaurants, when she’s at home she lets them rest on the counter before introducing heat.



Whether scrambled, soft boiled, or sunny-side up, each egg is packed with six grams of protein.

SHUTTERSTOCK

SHUTTERSTOCK (2)

SCRAMBLED

Andrews finds that many people tend to rush scrambled eggs, often throwing them in a skillet unmixed. But taking the extra step of beating them with a fork before putting them on heat makes a huge difference.

Additionally, she says, “It’s important not to let the eggs sit in the pan; you’ve got to keep them moving the whole time.” That technique, coupled with a lightly oiled or buttered pan (Andrews uses a well-seasoned cast iron) and silicon spatula, can create fluffy magic. Just make sure to take the eggs out of the skillet when they look like they’re almost done, as they will continue to cook even after they’re removed from the heat.

POACHED

The prospect of poaching eggs can often make home cooks quake in their aprons, but Andrews insists this method is quite simple. The key? Use a big pan and plenty of white vinegar (roughly one part vinegar to 10 parts water).

“Make sure there’s enough vinegar in your simmering water by tasting it, and really swirl the water around before adding the eggs,” Andrews advises. The moving water is crucial for the egg whites to collect around the yolk, while the vinegar helps coagulate the whites. From there, you wait, and swirl, and gently tap the yolk to see if it’s ready after a few minutes.

OVER EASY

Whether you call it fried, sunny-side up, or over easy, this is a classic breakfast preparation. Once the pan is hot enough, crack the egg into your oil and give it a little twirl around the skillet. Be patient and watch until the whites have just set before flipping to the other side. For sunny-side up, cover the pan with a lid to let the top cook.

SOFT BOILED

“When my grandma used to make a soft-boiled egg, a three-minute egg was a three-minute egg,” Andrews says. And that’s exactly what it is. Andrews insists on putting the egg in a pot filled with cold water, then bringing it to a boil. Once the water reaches a rolling boil, turn off the heat and let the egg sit for—you guessed it—three minutes to achieve the ideal, jammy yolk. If you prefer a firmer, hard-boiled yolk, leave the egg in for 12 minutes. Pro tip: Using slightly older eggs (about two weeks old) ensures easy peeling.

SHIRRED

A fancy name for baked, shirred eggs are a Sideboard signature that Andrews serves up at lightning speed on busy mornings. Traditionally, an egg is placed in a buttered ramekin with savory ingredients—such as ham, mushrooms, and cheese—then baked for about 15 minutes. To save time, however, Andrews half poaches her egg before finishing it in a 400°F oven for a mere two minutes.



Poached eggs are great on top of thick-cut toasted levain—the perfect vehicle for sopping up yolk.



Sprinkle shirred eggs with fresh herbs, such as chives, to add flavor and visual appeal.