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EATS, DRINKS & SCOOPS



RESTAURANT

star power

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ABOVE: Dennis Kelly (left) and Anthony Secviar (right) are the co-owners of Protégé.

It takes five minutes for Anthony Secviar, chef and co-owner of Protégé, to describe the meticulous process behind the Michelin-starred restaurant's beloved brick chicken. It starts with simmering Koshihikari rice in saffron stock, and cooking shallots and garlic for four hours to create the piperade sauce that forms the dish's base. Then there's the process of deboning the Cornish game hen, brushing it with a roasted garlic puree with Aleppo pepper, olive oil and lemon zest, and aging it for three to seven days to concentrate flavors. That's followed by sautéing the meat on a stainless steel press for crispy skin, then baking in the oven. "Then we take a dark chicken stock that we roast overnight, reduced down for about 14 hours, and finish that with a French-inspired Grenobloise so you bring some acidity as well as some unctuous, rich umami to the chicken sauce,"

Anthony describes. "We grill some romaine ribs, which kind of brings in some texture and a little bit of a palate refresher." The result is a masterful paella-esque dish with a California twist. "Point being, there's a ton of work that goes into what's ultimately chicken and rice," Anthony concludes when he finally comes up for air.

Though Protégé's dishes change with the seasons, this painstakingly prepared poultry has been on the menu since day one—now nearly seven years ago. "It's the most common and comfortable and soul-driven flavor profile on the planet," Anthony explains. "We wanted to be a neighborhood restaurant—and I think a neighborhood restaurant needs a great chicken dish."

Despite achieving a Michelin star just nine months after opening, Anthony emphasizes its con-



cept as “casual” several times. “Refined, elegant, but still casual and comfortable,” he elaborates. “Without all the hoopla.” At Protégé, the intention isn’t to treat food like an abstract. It’s about familiar dishes done divinely. “Most things you should recognize and have an idea of, ‘Am I going to like that?’”

Take the familiar pear and goat cheese salad. “We’re creating dishes that people have a reference to and they’re comfortable with, but maybe there’s some sort of element in there that either surprises or sets the new standard for what that pear and goat cheese salad should be,” says Anthony. “So when you go and see it on another menu, you ultimately think of Protégé.” In this particular instance, Anthony and his chef de cuisine Jeremy Wayne came up with a pear tartlet: shingled fruit atop a pressed layer of Cambozola blue cheese on a buttery shell with walnut

praline filling. “There’s no smoke and mirrors,” Anthony says. “It’s all based on product, a balancing of flavors and techniques.”

When Anthony and co-owner Dennis Kelly originally sat down to brainstorm the concept for Protégé, their goal was building it to last. “There’s a lot of flash-in-the-pans,” Anthony reflects. “There are restaurants you go to that people rave about the service, or the food, or the ambiance, but you rarely get all three ... We tried to create Protégé where all three of those things were very even-keeled, where none of them outshined each other.” Dennis also ensures a standout beverage program, lending his expertise as the 191st person in the world to earn a master sommelier diploma.

As for ambiance, the two settled on a woodsy and warm interior with rich walnut accents and a patio bordered with planters of young redwood trees. The a la carte lounge is anchored by a backlit bar for that neighborly feel, while the prix fixe dining room displays a large image of a foggy forest. “It’s a timeless affair,” Anthony says.

The staff is equally inviting and knowledgeable on any detail you care to ask about—from the artist behind the knotted rope installation that separates the lounge from the tasting room (San Francisco local Windy Chien) to that one ingredient you can’t quite pinpoint in a sauce. “No egos. It’s very collaborative,” Anthony asserts.

If Anthony wanted to boast, he certainly could. He’s honed his craft in a series of prestigious three-star kitchens. In Spain, he worked at Akelaré (“very formula-driven, almost like chemistry”

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with a “militaristic style of kitchen”), then world-famous El Bulli (“incredibly meticulous ... the most technical cuisine and kitchen on the planet”). His next job brought him to the Bay Area. “French Laundry reset everything ... I learned how to cook again,” he says, describing the new nine-course tasting menu the team developed every day. “Very intellectual ... challenging for the sake of being challenging.” Later, Anthony became the chef de cuisine at Addison by William Bradley. “Everything for William is flavor and that was when I think it started to click,” Anthony says. “He taught me how to taste ... The importance of when you put something down, you have to think of someone bringing it back up into their mouth.”

Just as readily, Anthony discusses his unassuming origins. “I got into cooking because I love to eat,” he

says simply, recalling the cooking shows he used to watch by Julia Child, Emeril Lagasse and Graham Kerr, The Galloping Gourmet. He credits his mom for nudging him towards a culinary career. “At the time, I was a jock kid, so I didn’t think it was macho enough,” he says with a chuckle.

For those looking to see Anthony and the Protégé team flex their culinary muscles, opt for the seven-course tasting menu. Each dish delights, from the delicately sweet and tender Wolfe Ranch quail brightened by pomegranate sauce and shallot jam to the silky, umami-rich nine-layer lasagna bolstered by the tang of aged parmesan and the earthiness of truffle. Even the freshly-baked sourdough is elevated by a frilly, gravity-defying butter sculpture.

Recent diners ended their meal

on a playful note. As they stabbed the cherry atop their chocolate gâteau, the tines of their fork sank through like butter. On further investigation, they found this fruit to be a ruse—a replica composed of cherry mousse and a chocolate stem.

As Anthony prepares to return to the kitchen, one question remains: Are the folks at Protégé hungry for a second star? Anthony cracks a smile. “Two would be an absolute nightmare for us ... We’re incredibly happy, humbled and proud to have one.” **P**

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