

SBLS

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CALIFORNIA DREAMING



*FRENCH-COASTAL BRASSERIE BLACK SHEEP RUSTLES UP
COMFORT CUISINE THAT STEPS OUT OF THE COMFORT ZONE*

BLACK SHEEP

BY Nicole Johnson

PHOTOGRAPHY Silas Fallstich

Ruben Perez is—contrary to what his brasserie’s namesake and bubbly anecdotes may tell you—not the Black Sheep of his family. Staying true to idioms, he is perhaps its dark horse: hailing from a Northern California clan of chefs, maître d’ Perez is a front-of-the-house restaurateur. That he strayed from his kitchen-loving kin is a delight for downtown’s creative culinary scene.

Perez’s one-year-old Black Sheep SB Brasserie—a French-coastal revolution of his original Black Sheep eatery of Ortega Street—is already a fan-favorite. It’s an inspired project starring consulting chef Jake Reimer, a virtuoso of high-end resort cuisine, whose guidance has graced exclusive properties such as the Bacara and Ojai Valley Inn. Tucked off State Street, Black Sheep is the unhurried, unhushed, and most consequentially, *unpretentious* Provence-meets-Pacific fusion of the now.

Perez hails from a heritage of fine dining (most notably, David Myer’s Michelin-starred Sona); 18 East Cota descends from a line of beloved French eateries. Black Sheep honors both histories while breaking their mold, fusing upscale panache with a family-style undertone that feels just right. Despite its spiritual soundness, courtesy of ever-flickering candlelight, Perez did a precautionary saging of the storied location before settling in. “You can definitely feel the rich saloon history here,” he laughs. Ghosts of Francophile past no longer linger, but whether from Mousse Odile’s charming *cuisine bourgeoise*, or the intimate buzz of Gene Montesano’s Café Luck, an everlasting coziness coats the space’s sleek facade.

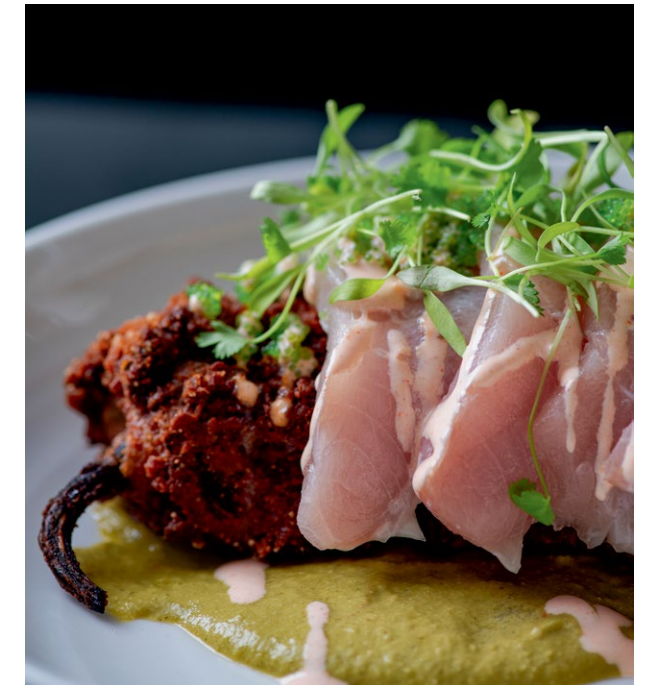
The Black Sheep’s interior accoutrements offer a chic spin on the contemporary California bistro. Glossy black trim neatly lines the ceilings, brass pendant bulbs curve airily through space, and the warmly up-lit bar, with its glassware aglow, gives a sultry stamp of sophistication.

As my friend and I sink into our luxe, silvery suede seating, Perez brings good tidings: we’ll be indulging in the four-course tasting menu—and to our surprise, a palate-prepping prelude is almost instantly served. A honeynut squash bisque, steeped with vanilla bean, pumpkin spice, and sauteed apples, features tart, tangy sweetness that readies the appetite and warms the soul. The sunny blend is paired with a bright crémant de loire poured in the most petite glass I’ve ever held; its citrusy effervescence sparkles us with anticipation.

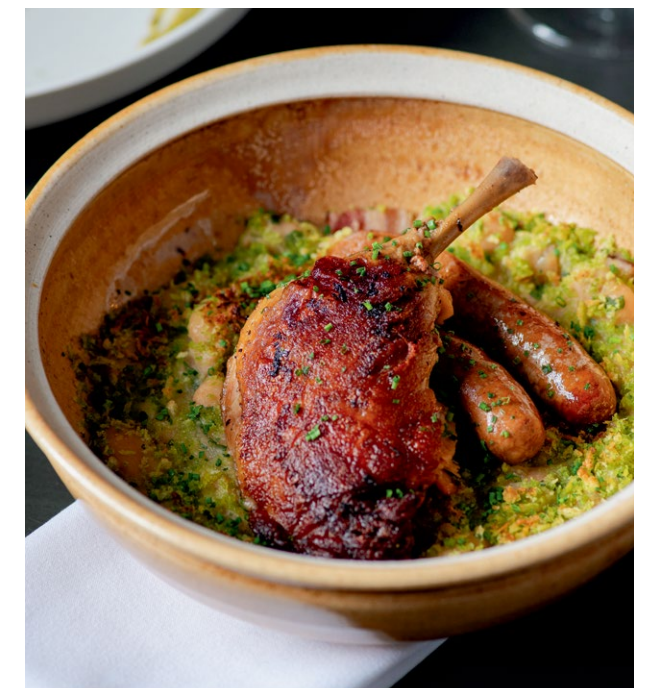
BUTTER GEM & ENDIVE SALAD



HAMACHI "POPPER"



HAND ROLLED RICOTTA CAVATELLI



CASSOULET

Next in line: the crudo du jour—tonight’s centerpiece is an impossibly tender bigeye tuna—feasibly just plucked from Hawaiian waters. Perched on a bed of energizing cucumber-radish salad, doused in a sublimely tangy raspberry yuzu kosho, and speckled with chives, the crudo ideally marries lightweight exuberance with a savory kick. An accompanying splash of peachy Riesling cuts through its fishiness, but respects the enduring saltiness that plays on my tongue well after each bite. Polishing the plate, I’m suddenly nostalgic for the past few minutes.

An imaginative butter gem and endive salad—complete with lively cara cara orange, dates, and supremely creamy fromage blanc—sits nearby, the duo imbuing our table with a vibrant, springtime blend of pink and green. As our plates are seamlessly cleared, raspy notes of jazz embrace my ear and level my eyeline. Once a hostess myself, I deem watching wait staff weave around as a true test of a restaurant’s atmospheric ease; Black Sheep’s servers swiftly dance amongst each other, and present our courses with such zest that it seems they may have tasted a dollop prior to plating them before me. I wouldn’t blame them.

The hamachi “popper,” an Asian-influenced callback to the original Black Sheep’s seafood forte, follows. A perfectly crusted, fried Anaheim chili—delicately stuffed with a spiced cream cheese and calrose rice blend—wears cuts of amberjack sashimi like an expensive coat. Roasted on a tomatillo-rich mole verde and garnished with wild arugula that playfully curls in all directions, the spicy serving is a Mexican and sushi-style delight that’s by no means French, yet packs a colorful, coastal punch. I’m told our dynamic fare is seasonally shifting and farmer’s market-sourced—manifested by these ambitious fusions, it’s also fueled by the kitchen’s apparent aversion to monotony.

My friend, enviously fluent in French, waxes poetic about each dish and paired wine to staff as they float by; I, meanwhile, communicate in spirited nods of celebration and furrowed brows of concentration. Given the come-as-you-are casual air to the brasserie’s elegant aura, I can skirt around menu mispronunciations for the night, letting the multifaceted flavors (and nodding) do the talking.

I’m particularly tongue-tied when the intensely aromatic, hand-rolled ricotta cavatelli announces itself. As a mushroom enthusiast, I relish in the earthy modesty of the dish’s stinging nettle pesto, mellowness of its white port sauce, and succulence of each pasta pillow, all of which grant the fungi room to shine. The next course’s cassoulet—which Perez dubs the bistro’s deluxe “pride and joy”—is likewise a refreshing twist on a classic: the duck confit’s gold-standard crisp, hearty bed of beans, and fresh herb crumble bear none of the domineering stuffiness of traditional countryside staples. An invigorating cioppino—a medley of silky Hope Ranch mussels, lushly buttered rockfish, and veggie-brimmed broth—closes out our dinner portion with gusto.

How we aren’t full is a miracle, but dessert, signaling our gastronomic coda, is a fair final note. A brown sugar crème brûlée—which satisfyingly takes two taps to break—flows with lavish caramel and floral Tahitian vanilla that just *tastes* expensive. The hot-and-cold, tart-and-sweet interplay of our raspberry chocolate fondant equally delivers. It’s time to bid Black Sheep *adieu*, but I know I’ll be back: perhaps for a “Meet the Winemaker” dinner, a series toasting to local enological excellence—and testifying to the eatery’s enthusiasm for cultivating community.*



CRUDO DU JOUR, BUTTER GEM & ENDIVE SALAD, HAMACHI "POPPER"

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