

## Rich Table

Don't pass up the duck lasagna: this new Hayes Valley restaurant glows with satisfying warmth

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**APPETITE** Not since State Bird Provisions and AQ opened towards the end of 2011 have I been as excited about an opening. Evan and Sarah Rich's new **Rich Table** is, kinks and all, even in the first month, well-rounded and satisfying. With efficient, informed service, reasonably priced wine list, few but well-crafted cocktails, a comfortable dining room with rustic-urban decor, and most importantly, a number of exquisite dishes, Rich Table is primed for greatness.



The duck lasagna's a keeper at Rich Table

The Riches, a husband-and-wife chef duo, both worked at Bouley in New York and Coi here in San Francisco. Evan was also at Quince, Sarah at Michael Mina — and the couple hosted memorable pop-up dinners at Radius last fall. This fine dining pedigree infuses their mid-range menu. At other restaurants, dishes don't often surprise beyond a menu reading. But here numerous dishes are more fascinating than their descriptions suggest. At AQ, dishes are works of art unfolding in layers of unexpected flavor. At Rich Table, there's an approachable comfort elevated with refined nuances.

On the light bites side, everyone (and I mean everyone) has been buzzing about paper-thin potato chips (\$7) with sardines interwoven through the center, dipped in horseradish cream. I'm a big sardine fan : these are not overrated, worth ordering every time. I brushed past Castelvetro olives (\$5) as common — thankfully a dining companion ordered them on one visit. Brightened by celery leaves and preserved lemon, the olives pop.

On an early visit, popcorn soup (\$10) tasted like buttery, pureed popcorn in a bowl. Yuzu kosho (a fermented paste of chili peppers and yuzu rind) perks up the creamy bowl. Outstanding squid dishes (\$14) morph with seasonal ingredients. The first incarnation wowed, the plump squid lively with watermelon yet simultaneously savory in black olive vinaigrette, dotted with crispy onions. This sweet-tangy, fresh-grilled dish was such a joy, I couldn't help but be a little let down by its successor: squid with figs, crisp onions and lardon draped across the top. The breezy luminosity brought by the melon felt a bit weighted down with figs, though still a winning dish. Crushed peas (\$14) with California yellowtail and saltine crackers to scoop up is vivaciously fresh, but comes in a slight (i.e. miniscule) serving.

The menu is not easily categorized nor a copycat of anyone, but is packed with pleasures peeking out in unforeseen places. Case in point? The pasta. I could come here for pasta alone (one dinner I ordered all four pasta dishes on the ever-changing menu). None shines more than a divine duck lasagna (\$19). A smile crosses my face just thinking of delicate, melting sheets of pasta, layered with braised duck, light béchamel, and tart Santa Rosa plums. It's a glorious pasta dish with no equal in this town... or in any other. Other pasta dishes may not reach these heights but each is worthwhile, even excellent, whether rigatoni bolognese (\$18) elevated by bone marrow and crispy kale or beets, or spaghetti (\$18) tossed with Jimmy Nardello peppers and clams.

On the entree front, lichen-poached rabbit (\$25) is heartwarming as it is gourmet, mingling with cippolini onions, radicchio leaves and broccoli raabe. Pork belly panzanella (\$24) is the classic Italian bread salad of tomato, basil, cucumber and toasted bread cubes tossed with fatty pork belly, though I took to a hearty tomato-braised oxtail on toast (\$25) even more. While accompanying grilled octopus and collard greens seemed disparate, the meaty toast alone makes it worthwhile, as satisfying as Southern BBQ.

Sarah Rich's desserts (all \$8) maintain the comfort-meets-craft spirit of the restaurant from a bright melange of chilled melon to caramelized olive oil cake in strawberries, a heightened strawberry shortcake. Panna cotta lovers shouldn't miss Sarah's silky rendition with changing seasonal accents.

Wines are priced by glass, carafe or bottle, conveniently



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grouped in three white and three red price categories, with strong options like 2010 Christian Moreau Chardonnay from Burgundy, or a 2011 COS Frappato from Sicily. The cocktail list (\$10 each) is short — no more than four or five at a time — and I've sampled six different ones. While some fare better than others (the Barn Wood, with Buffalo Trace bourbon and bitters, was a bit too musky-sweet from stone fruits), most offer understated elegance, actually different than other cocktail menus in simple purity.

The star is the lush, green Big Night, which looks like a healthy, green veggie drink, but is subtly smoky Del Maguey Vida mezcal mixed with nasturtium and ginger, topped with an edible flower. It's clean, strong, memorable. As is Land's End, the Riches' answer to a martini, using the incomparable St. George Terroir Gin, dry vermouth and foraged Monterey cypress. On the light, soft side, Let's Go is a refreshing sipper of Encanto pisco, coconut water and lime.

Sarah, Evan, and the engaged staff serve a warm vibe at their table in Hayes Valley — and an ever unexpected menu that focuses simultaneously on flavorful comfort and elegant simplicity.

## **RICH TABLE**

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