

San Francisco Chronicle

Rich Table combines casual with exciting

Michael Bauer



It was ironic and symbolic that my first visit to Rich Table was the night of the blue moon, because only once in a blue moon does a restaurant like this come along.

Two chefs in the same kitchen doesn't always work out well, but that's not the case with Evan and Sarah Rich. They met in New York while working at Bouley, then came to the Bay Area - he worked at Quince, she at Michael Mina, and they joined forces again at Coi. What they learned at these top places is put to good use in their exciting, casual 60-seat restaurant that opened in July in Hayes Valley.

It was obvious from my first taste of the first dish - castelvetro olives (\$5) - that the chefs were riding a winning bronco. The olives are a staple of many restaurants, but this version had the brilliant addition of fresh celery and preserved lemon, which seemed to enhance the anticipation of biting into the mild olives.

Every dish on the daily changing menu has that same rich balance that creates an exciting juxtaposition of flavors, whether it's huitlacoche - corn fungus - in pasta with goat milk (\$17); or lamb tartare (\$13) chopped to order and served with shelling bean puree.

Even simple dishes have unique underpinnings, as in the chicken soup (\$10) I'll crave from now on - a bowl of rich brown broth scattered with fennel levain croutons, bacon, greens and almonds.

The menu kicks off with signature house-made levain flavored with wild fennel; the thick slices (\$4), toasted and served with house-cultured butter, are well worth the charge.

Sardine chips (\$7) in the Bites section of the menu is a twist on a dish Evan Rich learned at Bouley. It consists of thin slices of potatoes, slit in the center to hold the fish, fried crisp and served with a puddle of horseradish cream and a scattering of pepper cress.

Other influences

It shows how influences from other chefs pepper the menu, but the Riches take what they've learned and make it their own. I never had Douglas fir in a dish until I ate at Coi; here it gives a subtle piney flavor to lasagna (\$17) with chicken, artichokes and chanterelles.

Each dish is carefully conceived and simply presented. Lightly seared yellowtail medallions (\$14) are garnished with dollops of yogurt and ribbons of cucumber. More cucumbers surround the fish; at first they look randomly cut, but each variation brings a different character to this workhorse vegetable. Like the celery with the olives, this helps reset the palate and bring out new facets of the fish.

I would love to have the spaghetti with mint, peas and fresh goat cheese (\$17) every day. The tang of mint, the sweetness of peas, and the creamy acidic punch of goat cheese again shows how a limited number of ingredients can be combined in masterful ways.

When you experiment and change the menu nightly, there are bound to be a few failures, but the ride is so much fun that the highs far outweigh the lows. One disappointment was spaghetti with octopus, cape goose berries and watercress (\$18). It was a beautiful looking dish, but the elements never came together.

Another example: an appetizer of squid, figs, lardon and crisp onions (\$14), where a jammy swipe of fig created a too-sweet distraction. Braised oxtail (\$25) tasted like Texas barbecue on a slice of toast, with octopus on the other side with collard greens; again, it was a rare instance where the flavors didn't relate. Still, the way they are put together is always interesting.

In a more successful main course, chicken breast is skinned and cut into strips (\$22), with Tokyo turnips cut on the mandoline, wedges of caramelized fennel and a sauce made of turnip greens and Champagne vinegar. The presentation looks informal, but complexity emerges with the crunch of croutons, the freshness of turnips and the studied arrangement of pungent mustard greens. The dish is casual but refined, expert yet effortless.

On another night the chef placed plump strips of buttermilk poached chicken (\$24) on top of Jimmy Nardello peppers with puffed wild rice that added a pleasing crunch to the blend.

The Riches use lots of grains, nuts and seeds, pairing king salmon (\$25) with buckwheat, bok

choy and ginger in a blackened shallot sauce. A side of yellow squash (\$6) might include sprouting wheat berries (\$6). Roasted beets (\$12) can feature sunflower seeds and sprouts, the whole mix given a delightful twist with duck fat vinaigrette and chunks of duck cracklings.

Desserts satisfy

Desserts (all \$8), crafted by Sarah Rich, are more straightforward: caramelized olive oil cake with perfect strawberries arching over one side and a quenelle of cream cheese on one visit, and a plum cake on another. There's always an exceptional panna cotta, made with yogurt, Concord grapes and lemon crumble one time; sweet cream and strawberries a different time.

Another satisfying dessert consisted of crisp shards of salted chocolate sable, stuck in a creamy pile of chocolate cream with raspberries accented with lemon and the herbal spike of sorrel.

It also says a lot about the owners' vision and attitude when the staff, some of whom have longstanding fine-dining experience, sign on to this more casual style of restaurant. They bring polish to the service, exuding a pleasant balance of care and informality.

It meshes with other elements of the experience, including the interior. The bottom portion of the walls is covered in whitewashed barn wood, the top in the natural gray weathered wood. Black metal light fixtures jut out from the walls over the bare scarred wooden tables, set with hard benches along the wall. The place is rustic but has a pleasant, finished feel.

With the windows overlooking Gough Street, the tiny open kitchen and the small bar that produces some of the top cocktails in the city, the synergy of elements is just about perfect, creating a restaurant that feels warm and inviting.

If it's not already, Rich Table will soon be one of the most coveted reservations in the Bay Area. Look for it to be the next Frances.

Rich Table

199 Gough St. (at Oak Street), San Francisco

(415) 355-9085. richtablesf.com

Dinner 5:30-10 p.m. Sunday-Monday and
Wednesday-Thursday, until 10:30 Friday-Saturday.

Full bar. No S.F. surcharges. Reservations and
credit cards accepted. Street parking, difficult during Civic Center events.

Overall: Rating: THREE STARS 1/2

Food: Rating: THREE AND A HALF STARS

Service: Rating: THREE STARS

Atmosphere: Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Prices: \$\$\$ (Most main courses less than \$25)

Noise rating: Noise Rating: FOUR BELLS Can only talk in raised voices (75-80 decibels)

The wine list

Taking a cue from Cotogna, the wines on the short list at Rich Table are categorized by price - \$45, \$55 and \$65.

In all but one case, there are seven white wines and seven red wines in each price range. What it means is that some wines have higher markups than others, but it all feels like a good value.

The selections on the regular list go well with the food, whether it's the 2010 Cep Pinot Noir Rose (\$11 glass/\$25 carafe/\$45 bottle) or the 2011 Cos Frappato (\$13/\$30/\$55).

The selection skews toward European easy-drinking wines, but if you want something with a little age or that is more expensive you can request a one-page reserve list. In addition there are three wines on tap, three beers on draught and six bottles.

Four "market cocktails" are also on the list, although the staff can create just about anything. On my visits all the cocktails (\$10) were well balanced, including a Lands End with St. George Terroir Gin and Monterey cypress; and a Big Night, a bright green cocktail with Mescal, nasturtium and ginger. The spirits and dessert wines are well-chosen.

If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$25, with a two-bottle limit. The fee is waived for each bottle purchased from the list.

RATINGS KEY

FOUR STARS = Extraordinary; THREE STARS = Excellent; TWO STARS = Good; ONE STAR = Fair; NO STARS = Poor

\$ = Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under; \$\$ = Moderate: \$11-\$17; \$\$\$ = Expensive: \$18-\$24; \$\$\$\$ = Very Expensive: more than \$25

ONE BELL = Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels); TWO BELLS = Can talk easily (65-70); THREE BELLS = Talking normally gets difficult (70-75); FOUR BELLS = Can talk only in raised voices (75-80); BOMB = Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings. Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.

Reviewers: Michael Bauer (M.B.), Nicholas Boer (N.B.), Mandy Erickson (M.E.), Amanda Gold (A.G.), Janny Hu (J.H.), Allen Matthews (A.M.) and Carey Sweet (C.S.)

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