

## Elements of Surprise

Josh Sens | Photo: Alanna Hale | September 14, 2012

Reclaimed wood, farm-forward ingredients— zzzzz. Rich Table might sound like every other joint in town, but it's not.



*Duck lasagna with Santa Rosa plums.*

In a rustic-chic space in Hayes Valley, [Coj](#) veterans Evan and Sarah Rich have opened a new restaurant, paying a worshipful tribute to the seasons with cooking that draws on the region's bounty while showackg!#adasdlk... Sorry, I lulled myself to sleep there.

It goes pretty much without saying that any self-respecting new place here aspires to bring the farm to its reclaimed wood tables. This is our region's culinary blueprint. It's what gives our dining scene a leg up on, say, New York's, but it's also what subjects us to accusations of artisanal sameness. "Congratulations," the jaded Bay Area diner says. "Those are beautiful tomatoes. Now do something with them that we haven't seen before."

[Rich Table](#) does do some different things with its tomatoes, such as charring and reducing them into a sticky sauce, which underpins a pasta tossed with smoked eggplant and burrata. The fresh roles the kitchen finds for its many ingredients are fitting for this newly conceived restaurant—though it may not look very intriguing at first blush.

After all, the restaurant wears familiar threads. It has communal tables and light fixtures forged from gas pipes. Walls of distressed wood, salvaged from a sawmill (bear with me here while I bolt back a Red Bull), enhance the upscale-farmhouse déjà vu. There is, of course, an open kitchen—and a bar to supply you with inventive cocktails, among the best of which is the Big Night, made with mescal, ginger, and nasturtium. It's bracing: biting, refreshing, balanced. As you sit there sipping, it's fair to say you've been in places like this before. But give it a moment.

"What are sardine chips?" you wonder as you peruse the menu. Turns out they're crispskinned sardines threaded through potato chips, delivered in a bowl with horseradish cream and cress. They're inventive and addictive, foreshadowing what's to come.

Like Stuart Briozza and Nicole Krasinski of [State Bird Provisions](#)—another husband-and-wife team behind a buzzed-about new restaurant—Evan and Sarah Rich collaborate on the menu. They also traffic in hard-to-categorize offerings. At times the fare seems like French-accented West Coast cuisine: Roasted beets, sliced and served in a mosaic of deep purple moons, come dusted with sunflower seeds and glisten in duck fat vinaigrette. Other times it shows an Asian influence, as with popcorn soup: the taste of toasted kernels in liquid form, fired with yuzu kosho's chili pepper heat.

Try to pigeonhole it, and the menu wriggles free. Dig into watermelon salad, topped with crispy onions and salty with black olive vinaigrette, and you turn up sautéed calamari, an unlikely find that surprises you with how well it fits. Cut through the dense layers of lasagna—delicate sheets of pasta, layered snugly over braised duck-wing meat, drizzled with a light riff on béchamel—and you come to a foundation of tart Santa Rosa plums: the perfect foil to all that richness. It's a dish you will remember, long after it's gone.

In keeping with the city's current culinary leanings, Rich Table aims for refinement without frills. The servers—who are cordial, prompt, and adept—tie aprons around their street clothes as their uniforms. Well-chosen wines mostly max out at \$65 a bottle, but they can also be had in rubber-topped carafes.

Though the Riches forage widely and shop at farmers' markets, it seems they've seen Portlandia: They're careful not to tumble into parody. Their menu bears no righteous roster of purveyors. Ask Evan how he acquired the lichen for his lichen-poached chicken—an earthy dish enhanced with cipollini onions, radicchio, and rapini—and he'll tell you it was while hiking up Mount Tam. But he doesn't make this sound like a heroic act. "I try to find things I like...and cook them," he says simply.

Inevitably, since they opened in July, there have been misses. Grilled prawns—with tonnato, garlic, and shredded little gems—was texturally challenged and tidal-tasting. The lettuce turned soggy from the tuna sauce it sat in, and the prawns were mushy and lacked any hoped-for shrimpy sweetness: no sugar, only sea.

I sent mine back, swapping it for pork panzanella, the fatty meat tossed with tomatoes, turnips, croutons, and cucumber, all in a nice, sharp vinaigrette. But presented as an entrée, it yearned to be a salad. If I could do it over, I'd opt for one of the excellent pastas (before Evan cooked at Coi, he was at [Quince](#)). That charred tomato sauce with smoked eggplant and burrata I mentioned earlier comes on rigatoni and is one of the best things I've eaten this year.

Located near the opera house, Rich Table runs at a clip suited to a patron who might want Rigoletto after his rigatoni. Desserts arrive before you know it: a bright mélange of melon granité and melon ice cream, or, far better, caramelized olive oil cake with roasted strawberries and cream cheese ice cream. The flavors are a sparkling example of seasonal cooking. Which, with some reflection you realize, might not be so tiresome after all.

***RICH TABLE, 199 Gough St. (at Oak St.), 415-355-9085, [richtablesf.com](http://richtablesf.com)***

**Dinner only, \$\$\$, \*\*\***