

San Francisco

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CRITIC'S TABLE

Café society

Spruce gives the city's boldface names a neighborhood restaurant close to home.

BY JOSH SENS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ED ANDERSON

Mark Sullivan made a good name for himself as chef at the Village Pub, a restaurant that's something of a Woodside institution—like Larry Ellison, but not as loud. Its mood and food are suffused with unforced elegance. It's fancy but unfussy, a restaurant that feels moneyed without really trying. This formula works in Woodside, a horse town with deep pockets in its dungarees. But it also seems to fly in San Francisco, where the pub's owners have launched their latest venture, Spruce. They're slumming in the shadow of Danielle Steel.

It's hard to find a restaurant better pitched to its surroundings than Spruce. It sits on a block of Sacramento Street packed with salons and jewelry stores, in a building that once served as a warehouse for stylish automobiles. The high-arched entry, constructed to accommodate Model Ts, makes a stately first impression, as does the spacious foyer with its limestone floors.

The restaurant, like a heart, is split into four chambers—a lounge, a takeout café, a dining room, and an adjunct room for private parties—all shaped by the same DNA. Lush browns and tans are expressed throughout: in a lovely marble bar, plush leather couches, and walls of chocolate mohair that look soft enough to sleep on. This is a restaurant of impeccable appearance, even prettier than its clientele.

No sooner had it opened than Spruce achieved what they call the "tipping point," which means that landing a reservation has become what I call a "pain in the ass." On any given evening, the place is jammed, its pop soundtrack punctuated by the *mwah, mwah* of air kisses as diners meet and greet in the bar and dining room.

The buzz surrounding Spruce emanates partly from its pedigree. It's run by the same team that scored such a success in Woodside, including Tim Stannard and Chef Sullivan, who deserves his reputation for sharp, seasonal cooking. (At Spruce, Chef de Cuisine Ben Cohn is in charge of the kitchen.) But there's also the matter

Much of the produce used at Spruce, like the zucchini in this salad (top), comes from the restaurant's farm in the Santa Cruz Mountains; patrons enjoy a quiet moment at the bar (center); pastries are available to go from the restaurant's café (bottom).



SPRUCE
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of pent-up demand. There aren't many dining options within walking distance. Like Sullivan's Woodside restaurant, Spruce has cast itself as a neighborhood hang-out in a neighborhood that clearly needed one.

What customers encounter, along with the crowds, is a smart, supremely efficient restaurant equipped to handle not just volume, but also divergent dining needs. You'll find a bar menu and a dinner menu, both available almost anywhere you sit. You can snack on Caesar salad (crisp, but a little shy on the anchovies for my taste) or charcuterie ranging from spicy coppa to smoked chorizo. Cheeses abound. Small plates of pasta include potato gnocchi and spearmint-and-chard ravioli, as delicate and comforting as satin sheets. You can also have slow-roasted short ribs, seared albacore tuna, or a beautifully done burger on a housemade English muffin—all before you range beyond the bar.

Sullivan specializes in a kind of cooking that rarely stays within a single country's borders, but also rarely strays where you've never been. This is California cuisine executed with near spotless precision, safe enough for bavette-steak-and-potato palates but freshened with enough flash to make you think you might be eating on the edge. Corn-and-salt cod chowder makes a sweetly balanced starter, with turmeric-poached dates bobbing in the bowl like exotic buoys. A salad of raw and cooked zucchini finds compelling character in one of the garden's least glamorous gourds: Sullivan crumbles dry ricotta onto raw zucchini slivers, then ornaments the plate with fried zucchini blossoms stuffed with a creamy version of the same cheese.

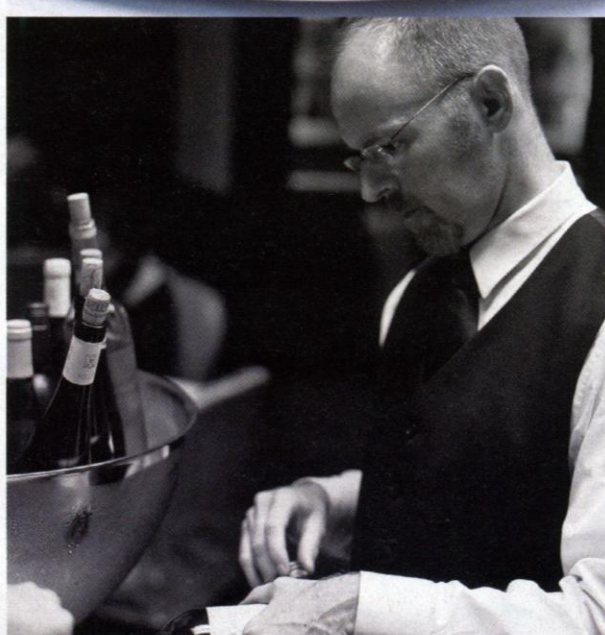
Much of Spruce's produce comes from the owners' private Woodside farm, which supplies the shelling beans that accompany a charred pork tenderloin. It's an ordinary entrée made captivating by crisp pork belly, a meaty sidekick that winds up stealing the show.

That's how it goes in Chef Sullivan's kitchen. If main dishes don't always merit shouts of excitement, they also never let you down. Butter-poached lobster with gnocchi and braised lettuce delivers on its promise of tender decadence. Roasted Moroccan chicken is beautifully prepared, the meat perfectly moist and punched up with preserved lemon.

To dine at Spruce is to put yourself in highly professional hands. It's a crisply packaged restaurant, backed by big money spent well. The wine list is epic, as thick and engrossing as a Tolstoy tome. And the service thrums along without missing a beat.

There's nothing extraordinary for dessert. The constellation of sweets includes warm palmiers and charentais melon soup, poured tableside over almonds and fig ice cream but composed, when I had it, of flavorless fruit. Chocolate-and-caramel fondant is the only dense, dark star. It isn't unforgettable, but that's not the point. Neighborhood restaurants are meant to be comfortable, cordial, and consistent, and Spruce qualifies as that—and more. ■

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Spruce's wait-staff expertly balances tasks, from looking after details in the dining room (top), to finishing a dish of short ribs at the table (center), to tending bar (bottom).