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Dining Out | San Francisco

## Spruce

BY HARVEY STEIMAN / PHOTOGRAPHS BY MITCH TOBIAS

**S**pruce and Bacar, two high-profile San Francisco restaurants, flung open their doors this past summer with broad, savvy wine lists and cuisine that adds a creative snap to comfort food, made with the city's penchant for fine ingredients in mind. Housed in converted industrial spaces, both restaurants feel like oases in their neighborhoods. But there the similarities end. • Spruce is brand-new, a foray into the San Francisco dining scene by the owners of Village Pub, a landmark restaurant

south of the city, in Woodside, and one of the best on the peninsula. Bacar, on the other hand, dates from 2000, but a recent remodeling, a new chef, a different wine director and new partners have transformed it.

The small shops that occupy the same quiet block as Spruce close at dusk. A passerby on Sacramento Street, in posh Presidio Heights, would hardly realize that a big, lively restaurant existed there, separated from the street by a small, gated foyer. The restaurant features a comfortable lounge on one side and a bakery-cum-café on the other.

Inside, under two-story ceilings, designer Stephen Brady fitted out the 70-seat space with mohair banquettes as big as love seats, and tables and leather chairs set far apart to avoid crowding. A breakfront at the back of the dining room holds wine, and a glassed-in wine cellar occupies the wall across from the kitchen. Service proved friendly and sharp.

The menu, developed by Village Pub chef Mark Sullivan (right) and executed by chef de cuisine Ben Cohn (formerly of Masa's), looks more daring than it actually eats. Summer dishes such as watermelon-and-rucola salad play the fresh sweetness of the fruit against the mild tang of fresh arugula, pieces of cured fresh sardines adding an exotic fillip. A dish called "raw and cooked zucchini, soft and dry ricotta" pairs cooked squash stuffed with fresh ricotta against a salad of broad, thin slices of squash sprinkled with grated aged cheese—clever but still homey. Moroccan chicken, a breast redolent of freshly ground spices, aims for a more refined balance than what you might find in a tagine, and there's only a whisper of preserved lemon. A dish of Maine lobster, cooked in butter to an ideal juiciness and removed from the shell, plays the lobster's natural sweetness against soft if slightly bland potato gnocchi; the braised lettuce underneath accentuates the French sensibilities of the preparation.

The whole menu, in fact, filters California cuisine ideas through a mindset that relies more on French techniques than on the Italian, Asian and Latin influences that are common in San Francisco. That's a boon for wine, especially more delicate reds such as the



The newly opened Spruce restaurant features a menu developed by Mark Sullivan (right) and executed by Ben Cohn. The cooking showcases California culinary style with French influences.

half-bottle of Domaine Serene Pinot Noir Evenstad Reserve 2004 (\$53) from Oregon that we drank with the entrées.

Seasonal desserts reflect the kitchen's fascination with high-quality ingredients. The most innocent-sounding dishes bring surprising pleasure. Stone-fruit bruschetta, for example, consisted of diced ripe peaches and plums mounded over a rectangular biscuit,

drizzled with vanilla-scented olive oil and topped with a quenelle of lemon verbena ice cream. A nice tea assortment, properly served, finished dinner elegantly.

Over the next year, Spruce intends to add to its list of 1,000 wines, which focuses on a range of vintages and options from leading vintners in specific regions. In Burgundy, for example, it's Raveneau for Chablis, Lafon and Roulot for Meursault, Niellon and Ramonet in Chassagne, Leflaive in Puligny, Mortet in Gevrey and Méo-Camuzet in Nuits. The Pinot Noirs cut a wide swath through the hot names in California, including Littorai, Hirsch, Brewer-Clifton, Ambullneo and Roar. Two pages list 50 whites and 50 reds at \$50 or less, including Owen Roe Syrah Columbia Valley Ex Umbris 2005 (\$44), Talley Chardonnay Arroyo Grande Valley 2005 (\$50) and Martin Ray Cabernet Sauvignon Sonoma County 2003 (\$40). Fifty by-the-glass selections include a German Riesling at each of the five sweetness levels.

In the end, Spruce makes its strongest impression with its execution and finesse rather than culinary daring or creativity. Bacar, on the other hand, roused our admiration more with its inventive dishes than with anything like finesse; perhaps that's more suited to its cutting-edge neighborhood.

### **Spruce**

3640 Sacramento St. **Telephone** (415) 931-5100 **Web site** [www.sprucesf.com](http://www.sprucesf.com) **Open** Lunch, Monday to Friday; dinner, daily **Cost** Entrées \$22-\$36 **Corkage** \$20 **Credit cards** All major

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