

SF Eats :: Absinthe

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Unsolved mystery of the universe: we've bopped by **Absinthe** for years without setting foot inside. There's no earthly explanation, as we're in equal love with the Hayes Valley and anything French; at the risk of falling into NoCal New Age jargon, "when the time is right, the universe will let you know."

Big up, then, to the universe: our maiden voyage to Absinthe was worth every moment of the wait. We couldn't be more enthusiastic about the buzzy atmosphere, clubby Parisian atmosphere (minus the attitude), or gorgeous gastronomy on offer here. In a word: *magnifique!*

At first glance, the scene is the star: this is the busiest pre-theater resto in SF. There's a hefty post-crowd too, and rarity of rarities in this early city: the bar menu is available til midnight (and sometimes beyond). Upon further inspection, however, the ambience is just the harbinger of the real *vedette*: an immensely talented young chef named Jamie Lauren, whose offerings come as close to perfection as we've had in a very long time. Managing a busy kitchen is an accomplishment in itself; to do so with this level of elan is a well-nigh wondrous feat.

It's been said that one need look no farther than *Escargots* (\$15) to determine a chef's mettle. Chef Lauren's, classically prepared in shell with garlic herb butter and crusty bread, could not be improved upon by any chef in France. Equally impressive was the *Duck Confit* (\$16); serving this classic warm, rather than room temperature, allowed the skin to sing; agro dolce cipploni onions provided a modern and entirely welcome update touch.

A generous *Antipasti plate* (\$18) features cured meats by Fra'Mani & Zoe's, accompanied by olives, pickled vegetables, smoked anchovy, and cristini: divine. (To preserve a Mediterranean, rather than classic French touch, the chef doesn't send out mustards unless requested, but does so with pleasure when asked.)

Absinthe: absolutely fabulous!

Among entrees, *Black Cod* (\$28) is cooked to perfection; not for Chef Lauren the unwelcome new trend of undercooking cod. A compilation of beans, Benton's bacon, and mint salsa verde, seasoned piquantly, a delicious diversion from the all-too-common sickly-sweet pan-Asian sauce fate that most local cod meet.

Queen for a day, though, were the *Beef Cheeks* (\$26), a man-sized portion braised in aromatic saffron and cinnamon, and served with smashed potatoes and a medley of roasted baby vegetables. This is a signature dish that will remain in our dreams for more than a few days; here's hoping it remains on the menu forever.

The restaurant's classic dessert is pot de crème, but we opted for *Chocolate Tart* (\$8), served warm with (bravo!) salted caramel sauce and (bravo again!) chunky peanut ice cream. We were intrigued by the extensive cheese selections; those will wait for next time.

And with food this deliriously good, there *will* be a next time: *Cela, c'est certain.*

Kissed by perfect presentation, impeccable attention to ingredients, and devotion to detail, Absinthe is nothing short of a modern landmark in the San Francisco culinary landscape. Toques off to this divine destination and its amazingly accomplished chef!

Absinthe

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