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BOING! There's so much to fall for right now—an arts hub that's changing the city, fitness gurus with soul, brave ways to greenify your home. Even Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen's over-the-top Cupid's Span, piercing the Embarcadero's skyline. BY JEFF KURTZ

Raising the bar

A new chef revitalizes the menu and helps **Bar Tartine** realize the promise of its pedigree.

BY JOSH SENS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHERI GIBLIN

Baking is the bread and butter of Elisabeth Prueitt's business. Since 2002, she and her husband, Chad Robertson, have run Tartine, the Mission district bakery with the artful croissants and croque monsieurs. Like Cafe Fanny in Berkeley, Tartine has achieved the kind of Pied Piper following that allows it to administer glacial counter service without riling its patrons into revolt. Apparently, good pastries are the opiate of the masses. And the gentry. At few places will you find so many people willing to while away their lunch breaks waiting for espresso and flaky-crust quiche.

There are three common ways to build on such success. Purists single-mindedly persist in their original pursuit. Capitalists sell out. And masochists redirect their energies—in this case, by starting a restaurant.

Prueitt and Robertson, in choosing the last, relentless option, set their sights on a once-scurvy block of Valencia Street formerly given over to dive bars and 20-somethings in the throes of identity crises. The Mission now has a more mixed demographic, and Bar Tartine, which opened last November, attracts it. Some diners seem imported from a tattoo parlor. Others look like they were bussed in from Russian Hill.

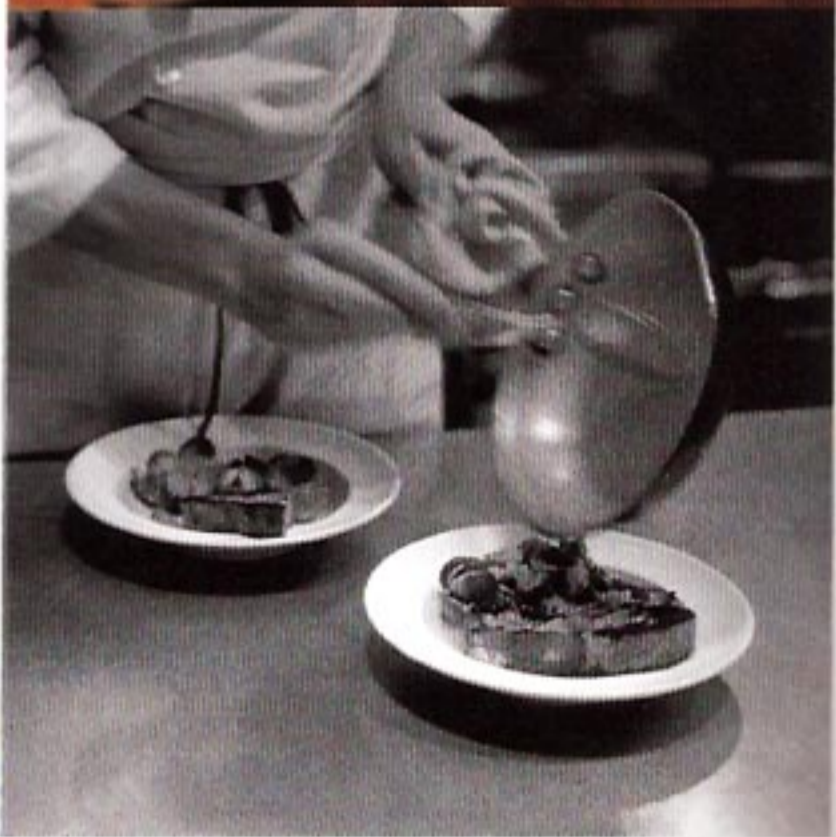
The restaurant is beautifully done up in a style that meets the requisites of a neighborhood bistro: a long, narrow dining room with banquettes on one side and a bar that butts up against an open kitchen on the other; dark, painted wood floors; and a large shared table (illuminated by an antler chandelier) that adds to the mood of communal cheer.

Tartine Bakery is so popular that its owners could have opened a dental clinic and been overbooked for root canals. The fact that they chose to offer olives, fine cheeses, and well-selected wines, along with a pleasant place in which to consume them, guaranteed standing-room-only crowds.

In its early months, Bar Tartine generated quite a bit of buzz. Too much for its own good. The kitchen



Owners Elisabeth Prueitt and Chad Robertson; roasted marrow bones; steamed clams.



BAR TARTINE
561 VALENCIA ST.
(AT 17TH ST.) S.F.
415-487-1880 SEE
DINNER ONLY
RESERVATIONS
RECOMMENDED
WHEELCHAIR
ACCESSIBLE
★★★

and the staff were overwhelmed, and the rhythms and the flavors of the restaurant were off. Prueitt and Robertson have since hired a new chef—Tracy McGillis, most recently of Incanto—and addressed the sloppiness of the service. The result is a restaurant that functions more smoothly than it once did, with food that strives for less but offers more.

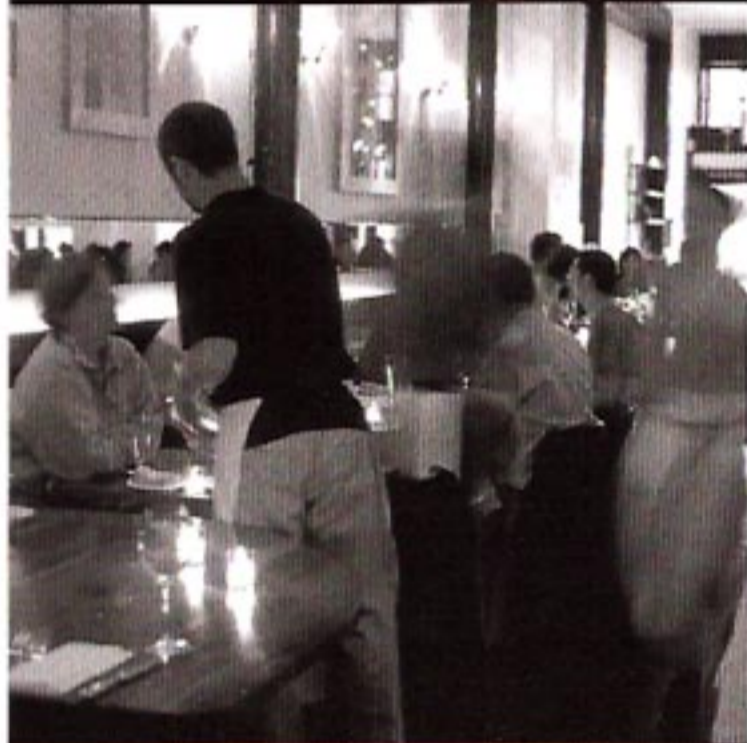
It's hard to get a sense that much has changed from just reading the menu. Bar Tartine has always had casual intentions. It was a place for duck-fat fries and duck rillettes, a place to make a meal of a bowl of mussels washed down with a glass of sauvignon blanc. Along the way, though, the kitchen tended to muddle matters, encrusting a perfectly good piece of cod with a geologic layer of black olives, drowning porcini mushroom and lentil salad in so much dressing that it turned to soup.

No more. The restaurant has retained its easygoing aura and many of its elbows-on-the-table dishes, but now there are no wrinkles and no overreaching. A meal that opens with a perfect roast pork loin, sliced deli thin and served with a sweet side-spooning of onion marmelade, moves on to an entrée of black bass, its skin seared crisp, ringed by citrus salad and caramelized endive. Grilled asparagus, lounging like leggy models and dressed in nothing but breadcrumbs and parmesan, soak up the sunny yolks of soft-cooked eggs. Big, chunky marrow bones, flanked by fava beans and oozing their salty, spreadable contents, stand like Stonehenge but make for some of the city's best eating—a monument to indulgent simplicity.

On my first trips to Bar Tartine, the waitstaff worked the room like scattered atoms: lots of motion, little effect. But since the chaos of the early months has receded, the service appears to have hit its stride. Whether my opinion can be trusted is another matter. On my final visit, I neglected to wear one of my thousand disguises, and I'm fairly certain that someone on the staff recognized me. That night I was treated to tag-team service—one waiter to refill my water glass, another to tend to my shifting whims, and a third to fold my napkin when I stood up—which I hadn't received before. Still, when I glanced about the room, it seemed to me that other diners also had their napkins folded for them and their water glasses swiftly refilled. Equality and justice can still reign in restaurants, even as they fail us on the street.

Given the pedigree of the place, desserts at Bar Tartine arrive to lofty expectations. They don't disappoint. Among the unfaltering options, sticky date pudding in a hot toffee sauce is spongy and sweet, but not to the point where you can't stand it. Shaker lemon tart, an oval-shape pastry taken to a shock-and-awe degree of tartness, flakes apart in a perfectly plucky pomegranate sauce. There was never any going wrong here. The problem was, there weren't many other ways of going right. Only months ago, Prueitt and Robertson were working with a fallen bistro. What they now have is a neighborhood restaurant on the rise. ■

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Shaker lemon tart; the narrow, bustling dining room; asparagus salad with soft-cooked eggs.

