

## Dining Update: Inventive twists at Cortez

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*In May I was poised to publish an update on Cortez. The Bay Bread folks had sold the restaurant earlier in the year to Ron Silberstein, who owns Thirsty Bear and Ramblas, and one of the two dynamic chefs had departed.*

### IMAGES



KURT ROGERS/THE CHRONICLE / SFC

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Only days before the scheduled review date, I learned the other chef was leaving and was being replaced by Jenn Puccio, so I held off on the review.

Now, several months down the line, she's firmly in control of the busy open kitchen and her husband, Ed Puccio, former general manager of Ubuntu in Napa, is covering the front of the house.

### Arty decor

Cortez has been one of the most visually exciting restaurants in the city since opening nearly five years ago. The long, narrow room could be claustrophobic - it's partially subterranean, with only small windows near the ceiling - but instead it feels like walking into an artist's canvas. The colored balls suspended from the ceiling on black metal tubes have the feel of a Miro painting, and the colored windows and wall detailing evoke Mondrian.

However, looking over the menu, I had my doubts that the quality had been maintained. The description of the dishes didn't draw me in, and the amuse-bouche - cucumber gelee with a bitter-tasting slice of grapefruit - braced me for further disappointment.

All that changed with the shot glass of French onion soup with Parmesan and breadcrumb foam (\$6 for 2) that tasted just as you'd expect, with the sweetness of the main ingredient, the tang of cheese and nuttiness of the bread. The silken texture topped with frothy bursting bubbles was a clever use of techniques that everyone seems to be abusing these days.

I chose what seemed like the most interesting small plate - pan-seared octopus with squid, preserved lemon, dots of black garlic and chile oil, and purslane (\$15). The combination was not only interesting but on point. The Kurobuta pork short rib (\$14), a meaty hunk of tender meat that fell cleanly from the bone, mingled with still-crunchy

pickled red onions and truffle jus. Alongside were 1960s-looking "flower power daisies" that turned out to be warm cauliflower puree.

### **Riveting ravioli**

At first I thought the kitchen stumbled when the ricotta-filled ravioli (\$17) came out looking dry, covered with breadcrumbs and equally dry slices of sauteed artichoke. Yet, one bite and I realized the dish scored big time. The pasta was glazed in a thin layer of butter that made the ingredients adhere, and the creamy filling was enough "sauce" for the dish.

Grilled lamb chops (\$22), another large plate, was arranged over an eggplant puree with fried chips that blended with the Gypsy pepper romesco, basil and shaved Spanish goat cheese to create another dynamic combination.

Dessert was a slight letdown. A streusel crust over barely warmed plums (\$10) tasted cooked ahead, and the accompanying burrata sorbet was a strange idea that didn't go anywhere. However, our smiles returned with the milkshake shot glass for two (\$6), where the toasted coconut flavor was sweet and intense.

Service was also expert. The staff timed the dishes to come out one at a time and regularly changed out plates and flatware, making for a leisurely enjoyable evening and a memorable meal.

A second visit a few weeks later supported my earlier enthusiasm; this time they lit my palate with the first dish: seared Padrón peppers (\$5), glossy with olive oil and smoked sea salt. Pan-seared black cod (\$14) was paired with briny oysters, green olives, Early Girl tomatoes and samphire, also known as sea fennel.

Things got even more interesting with "a tasting of duck & plums" (\$18), where the chef offered three preparations of each: rillettes with plum mustard, a buttery torchon with marmalade, and mousse-like pate with what tasted like fresh dices of fruit.

### **Dated presentation**

The large plates had a retro 1990s sensibility - for example, slices of New York strip steak (\$29) set atop a pancake of smashed potatoes and strewn with marrow crumbs, chunks of seared bone marrow, herb gremolata, and a free-form drizzle of sauce. It looked sloppy and overproduced, although the flavor was good.

Service on this visit wasn't quite as professional - the waiter didn't write down the order, brought the wrong dish and become a tad intrusive because he was trying too hard.

It's been an unsettled year for the restaurant, but with the Puccios at the helm, Cortez is back on top.

## **Cortez**

550 Geary St. (at Taylor), San Francisco; (415) 292-6360 or *cortezrestaurant.com*.

Breakfast 6:30-10:30 a.m. weekdays, 7-11 a.m. weekends. Dinner 5:30-10:30 p.m. nightly. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Paid lots nearby.

<b>Overall</b>	Rating: THREE STARS
Food	Rating: THREE STARS
Service	Rating: TWO AND A HALF STARS
Atmosphere	Rating: THREE STARS
Prices	\$\$\$
Noise Rating	Noise Rating: FOUR BELLS

### **RATINGS KEY**

FOUR STARS = Extraordinary; THREE STARS = Excellent; TWO STARS = Good; ONE STAR = Fair; NO STARS = Poor