

common ground

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healthy living » tastebuds

Gather

Sweet and Savory
Sustainability

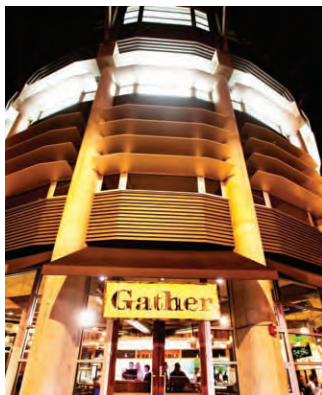
BY RICH HIGGINS

PHOTOS BY CARMEN TROESSER

Dining at Gather is an organic experience. From the food to the sourcing to the hospitality to the enlightenment, the restaurant is truly unique and alive. We've all seen the claim on restaurant menus of food sourced "locally and sustainably whenever possible." Gather dismisses this catch phrase as a politician's promise — a popular stance full of loopholes. While there are many restaurants serving great food sourced with sustainability in mind, Gather ups the ante by treating savory, sweet, and sustainable with the utmost importance.

Gather's co-owners, Ari Derfel and Eric Fenster, eat only what they can trust, and with Executive Chef Sean Baker at the helm, serve only what they want to eat. They've created a restaurant where you don't have to inquire about whether the onions are pesticide-free or whether the cod is wild and sustainably caught. They're as open about their food purveyors as they are about their sources for building materials. Gather is the transparent, open-armed dining experience so many Bay Area foodies have been waiting for. It honors the food, seeks justice in the cultivation and cooking, and embraces the diner's individuality.

To Derfel, "omnivore versus vegetarian is an old, obsolete way of thinking." The menu changes daily, and on the evening I dined at Gather, of its 24 menu items, 13 were vegan or vegan upon request, and 18 were gluten-free or gluten-free upon request. The knowledgeable servers are there merely to offer guidance, through a tempting menu, to the Bay Area's quilt of omnivores, vegetarians, locavores, pesce-, lacto-, ovo-, and aphrodisiac-what-have-yous. To be that much more inclusive, Derfel and Fenster plan soon to expand Gather's hours to include breakfast and lunch. The rounded space radiates visually and warmly from the kitchen, and the layered interior tops an understory of reclaimed wood tables and



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old-belt benches with canopy elements of ivy and pickle jars of colorful vegetables.

My guest and I began our meal with the Vegan "Charcuterie" plate (\$14). I was particularly curious to taste Baker's vegan interpretation of the salty, meaty preparation that is featured at so many Bay Area restaurants. The charcuterie consisted of five vegetable and sauce compositions, each incredible. The black fig mole was one of the tastiest I have ever had, and it supported the bitter, grilled chicories perfectly. The broccoli rabe's sweet shoots and deep,

bitter greens were accented perfectly by fried capers and a mustard sauce. The asparagus was grilled to perfection, and I felt privileged as I bit remorselessly into the green freshness of spring. "Oysters in the half shell" nestled oyster mushrooms with avocado "liquor" into red Belgian endive, and an almond horseradish purée was the milieu for roasted carrots and beets. This charcuterie plate, served on an attractive wooden board, was a kaleidoscope of color, texture, and flavor, and each element was well conceived and executed. However, in the end, it suffered a bit from the whole being less than the sum of its parts. As a composed dish, it felt a little forced, pairing too many disparate elements on one plate.

Next, we enjoyed a small plate of crispy cardoons with almond pepper sauce (\$9). I felt

compelled to order the dish, since a chalkboard above the kitchen quoted Baker: "Cardoon is like the big brother of the artichoke. In my opinion, the cardoon is the most underrated vegetable in the world." The cardoon stalks were hearty, substantial bites fried in a savory tempura batter. While it was like eating an artichoke without all the fuss (and fuzz), the flavor was a bit pallid. The sauce was a tasty riff on romesco, allowing the almond and spice to shine amidst the earthy peppers, and a bright scallion salsa cut nicely through the dish's left.

Traditionally, onion soup is made with beef stock, but Gather's is a vegetarian version (\$7.50). The menu tops it with San Joaquin Gold cheese and croutons, though either or both can be omitted for a vegan or gluten-free version. We ordered ours without the cheese, trusting in Baker's abilities to build flavor, depth, and nuance without beef stock, butter, or cheese. It was a fantastic bowl of soup, the onions' caramellike sweetness enrobed in an unctuous, rich, brown, well-seasoned stock. The croutons offered an extra element of chewy crunch.

Our Young Chicken Under a Brick (\$18) was to supermarket chicken what local beer is to Budweiser. It was flavorful and unadulterated, and with its aromatic accompaniments of radish slices, fennel sauce, and vinaigrette, it paired well with an organic India Pale Ale from Santa Cruz Mounting Brewing Co. A bed of nutty, al dente kamut grains was on duty to soak up the juices and sauce.

We finished with a light dessert of pecan sorbet and salted milk chocolate ice cream (\$3 per scoop). Each was a satisfying end to a great meal. The pecan sorbet was a bit chalky with pecan flour, but its flavor was superb, and it was garnished with spicy, candied pecans. In the ice cream, I tasted more cocoa than chocolate — a welcome departure from the rich chocolate of many desserts — and the salt added a delightful piquancy.

Gather is an important link in the Bay Area food system, supporting the land and people that produce the best food and also the varied diets and tastes of the people who live here. It is a flattering, contemporary, and sensitive restaurant, and its ethos is sure to be contagious. Newly opened, Gather is already a fantastic restaurant. At times it can feel as if it is still growing into its stature as foodie destination, but that growth is all part of its organic journey. 🍷

Rich Higgins, brewmaster at San Francisco's Social Kitchen & Brewery, is also a foodie and a cicerone, pairing great beer and great food wherever he goes. Contact him at richhiggins.com.