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HEIRLOOM CAFE HAS PROMISING START

By Michael Bauer

Matt Straus, a Boston native, lived for eight years in Los Angeles, where he worked in the wine program at places like L'Orangerie, Sona and Grace. But he always wanted to live in San Francisco, so after looking for two years without finding his ideal job, he packed up and moved anyway.

For two years he waited tables and worked in the wine program at Jardiniere and RN74, but his dream was to open his own wine-centric restaurant offering aged bottles of less expensive wines with simple but expertly prepared food.

He, as much as any other restaurateur, had the chops to do it. He started working in kitchens at 14 and eventually went to culinary school in Vancouver, British Columbia. In about 2003 he began to cellar

wines destined for his future San Francisco restaurant.

His foresight has been rewarded. In May, he opened Heirloom Cafe, an unassuming 49-seat space at 21st and Folsom streets where he is both chef and wine director. With him popping from behind the line of the open kitchen to greet customers or serve wine, it feels as if you're eating in someone's home.

His menu is as well chosen and focused as the wines. It consists of four or five appetizers, a pasta, a main course and two or three cheeses, which are displayed on a table in the center of the room. The only desserts on the a la carte offerings are affogato (\$7) made with Straus organic ice cream and Ritual coffee (\$2), and fresh-baked chocolate chip, oatmeal and walnut cookies (\$2 each).

He also offers a \$50 three-course menu, which includes two glasses of wine. For the quality, it's a great deal.

At first glance, the menu doesn't seem that exciting - bacon mushroom tart (\$10), onion soup (\$8), mussels in a broth laced with roasted tomatoes and sherry (\$11) and roasted asparagus. When I first looked over the menu I wondered whether the place warranted a full review. Yet a taste of each dish revealed otherwise.

Once inside, even before tasting the food, I began to change my opinion. There's an aura of authority and sophistication con-

veyed by the almost bonsai-looking flower arrangement at the front door, a refined contrast to the scarred wood floors and homey vintage wallpaper and sconces along one wall.

The open kitchen and dining counter add to the excitement. The main seating area consists of hard slatted benches along two walls, with two communal tables in the center that each seat 12. The bench can be hard, the chairs uncomfortable, so the seats at the counter are the best.

Even before diners get settled, a waiter brings a small dish with Castelvetro olives and Marcona almonds. The staff sets the right tone - relaxed and efficient - which dovetails with the surroundings. Yet even with the Victoriana decor elements, the restaurant has a modern feel.

The three-course menu on one visit started with a salad of La Quercia prosciutto draped around arugula and pole beans, set on a thin smear of mashed figs and snowflakes of Parmesan. It's a blend that hits every taste sensation -sweet, salty and umami, with a hint of bitterness and minerality added by the 2008 Qupe Marsanne. The main course on two visits was roast halibut with cauliflower puree, a sprinkling of sweet English peas and the earthy essence of mushrooms, which led Straus to choose the 2005 Ladoucette Pouilly Fume; it has good acids followed by a creamy, rich note from bottle age.

On another visit the main course was New York steak, masterfully seared to leave the meat medium rare inside. It was served with a natural juice pan sauce and a big spoon of long-cooked broccoli, a dull army green color that belied the taste; it was freshened with gratings of cheese and pine nuts. On other visits the steak was listed as the only main course in the a la carte section (\$22). There's also an "off the menu" hamburger (\$12) that's always available for the asking. The thick, juicy patty is sandwiched in an English muffin slathered with earthy Epoisse cheese, sweet onion jam and a blanket of arugula. The cheese has a barnyard flavor that might not appeal to everyone, but as with just about everything else, Straus ably balances the various components.

On all visits the dessert on the fixed-price menu was an olive oil cake topped with fresh berries and black pepper syrup. It was good, but I wanted a dollop of whipped cream to complete the dish.

After two visits, I was sure Heirloom Cafe deserved three stars, but I revised that slightly on my third visit when the menu was exactly the same as 10 days earlier. I'm an advocate of limiting menus and perfecting dishes, but with such limited choices it seems that at least the fixed-price menu should change more often.

