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LUSCIOUS, LOCAL FARE AT HEIRLOOM CAFE

By Patricia Unterman

SAN FRANCISCO — There is no sign. First-timers only realize that the ground floor of this corner Victorian on a residential block of the Mission district houses the Heirloom Cafe when they find the front door and walk in.

Even then, the details that stand out in this high-ceilinged room speak about the conversion — a do-it-yourself, practical build-out with a proud open kitchen, a communal refectory table and a handful of small wooden tables and chairs.

No glossy design, expensive materials or custom equipment. Just the necessities for putting out a simple, local, high-minded

dinner with excellent wine. Heirloom is a certain kind of club.

Owner Matt Straus, an eight-year veteran of Campanile in Los Angeles, finally made it to his dream city, San Francisco, to open his dream restaurant, one directly inspired by our beautiful ingredients.

Each night, he and his chef John Merritt decide on a few a la carte dishes plus a \$50 three-course prix fixe dinner that includes two glasses of interesting, well-chosen wine.

One evening, that prix fixe began with a pretty salad of green and yellow beans, prosciutto and arugula, on a swatch of roasted fig puree, with a glass of Qupe Marsanne. A hunk of roasted halibut, silken and moist, scattered with fresh peas and paper-thin slices of fresh porcini, anchored by velvety cauliflower puree and finished with a light, buttery sauce was sublime. It deserved its lofty pairing with an elegant French pouilly-fume.

Warm olive oil cake, with crisp edges and a soft interior, sopped up the juices of diced strawberries sweetened with black pepper syrup and scented with mint.

This meal was buoyed by a young, charming waiter; an intelligent maitre'd who kept her eye on the whole dining room; the soft light from sconces and votives, the tactile pleasure of natural wood, white cloth napkins and large, thin wine glasses; and the

personal, ingenuous spirit of the place. Another night two of us sat at the counter in front of the kitchen, where the cooks split for us a flower-like arrangement of crisp, butter lettuce leaves dressed with fresh herbs and a lemony vinaigrette.

Each night the kitchen prepares one pasta dish, and if it happens to be pillow-light gnocchi with soft crumbles of fennel sausage, sweet corn, a little fresh tomato and porcini with a few leaves of peppery wild arugula (\$16), order it. The technique — texture and balance — makes it soar.

Not on the menu, Heirloom's verbalized and now signature Epoisses burger (\$12), a big, thick, juicy, medium-rare patty with the truffle-y, soft French cheese mixed into the meat is luscious, slathered with caramelized onions and wild arugula on a small, puffy bun.

Also great with red wine is tender, sliced New York steak with shelling beans and piquant salsa verde (\$22).

Finish wine leftovers with a complex goat cheese from our beloved local Andante dairy (\$3), or a semi-soft French cow's milk cheese called Abbaye de Tamie, opulent and sharp.

Heirloom is all about place, San Francisco, and our way of cooking and eating here. The fact that an impassioned operator with refined vision and limited capital can open a first endeavor that satisfies so completely

speaks to the sustainability and enduring appeal of our very local cuisine.

