

## CHOICE TABLES

## In Oakland, Innovation Is on the Menu

By DAVID FARLEY

**B**OCANOVA, a new industrial-chic restaurant on Jack London Square in Oakland, Calif., has all the characteristics of a sophisticated urban restaurant: banquet seating, wooden tables, irregularly shaped Edison light bulbs hanging from the ceiling, and a stained-glass bar in the middle of the spacious dining room. The most significant detail about Bocanova's location, however, is what's no longer there: just a few years ago, this same space was an Old Spaghetti Factory.

Jack London Square has been reborn. The area on Oakland's inner harbor was developed in the '70s, and the city had hoped that the waterfront space would have a quirky, independent appeal. But chain restaurants soon moved in, and both local residents and tourists largely stayed away.

However, that may soon change. Out went the chain restaurants, whose leases were not renewed in an effort by developers to reinvent the square (a plan approved by the city). In came a cast of big-name chefs — as well as a new six-floor, 72,000-square-foot farmers' market scheduled to open later this year.

In fact, the effort to refashion Jack London Square reflects a larger trend. Unlike San Francisco, its sister city across the bay, Oakland hasn't been known for its innovative menus. But in the last few years, a number of noteworthy restaurants have opened, some led by chefs who have fled San Francisco's high rents, and a few of whom put in time at the legendary Chez Panisse in neighboring Berkeley. Michelin upped the ante when it awarded a star to an Oakland newcomer, Commis. But, as a recent survey of its Oakland brethren showed, Commis is not alone.

**COMMIS**

At Commis, the talented chef James Syhabout, who has logged time in acclaimed international kitchens like El Bulli and the Fat Duck, plays with textures and flavors in a masterly and deeply satisfying way.

Commis has the feel of an almost-secret experiment in progress. The name of the restaurant, which means "apprentice chef" in the parlance of French kitchens, is nowhere to be found on the floor-to-ceiling windowed facade. Inside, splitting a spare 30-seat dining room and surrounded by a counter and stools, is the open kitchen, where Mr. Syhabout and his sous chefs quietly go about their work.

During a recent visit, I sampled the \$59 three-course dinner (a six-course dinner at the six-seat counter overlook-

ing the kitchen is \$95). An amuse-bouche set a tellingly ambitious tone for what was to come: a hard-boiled egg yoke in a shallow, foamy onion soup, with a supporting cast of minced chives and steel-cut oats. Hiding underneath, a layer of smoked date purée added a stratum of sweetness to the savory.

Likewise, a subtle confit of Atlantic cod, which had the texture of soft tofu, was bolstered by a puddle of creamy, semisweet brown rice and almond milk. The only near-miss was the corned pork jowl salad. The pork itself was almost revelatory — nuggets of smoky meat with the consistency of scallop — but the pairing of chicory was texturally dull.

Service was friendly — almost chummy — but professional; all my questions about the menu were expertly answered. That seems to reflect the overall philosophy of Commis: a friendly neighborhood bistro that can double as a destination restaurant.

Commis, 3859 Piedmont Avenue; (510) 653-3902; commisrestaurant.com. Dinner for two, without drinks or tip, is about \$120.

**BOCANOVA**

One of the first restaurants to land in the new Jack London Square last September, Bocanova is run by the chef Rick Hackett, one of those Chez Panisse alumni. Unlike MarketBar, Mr. Hack-

ett's Mediterranean restaurant in the recently revamped ferry building in San Francisco, Bocanova looks south. The menu, it turns out, was inspired by a family meal — the restaurant staff dinner shared before service — at MarketBar. A couple of staff members made dishes from their South American homelands; Mr. Hackett was impressed and Bocanova was born.

The long menu divides the tapas-sized dishes into sections based on kitchen provenance: the pantry, the raw bar, the fryer, the stoves, the ovens, the grill, the rotisserie. I ordered a glass of Argentine malbec from the mostly South American wine list and dug into the first plate that landed on my table:

deviled eggs (one of the most popular dishes on the menu, according to my waiter) stacked high with Dungeness crab and topped with chipotle aioli, giving it a refreshing yet mildly spicy kick. Scallops from the Sea of Cortez followed, perfectly seared, wading in a shallow pool of rich, brown Brazilian curry. The sweet potato and chipotle gratin arrived last, offering a blend of subtle sweetness and bold smokiness.

Bocanova, 55 Webster Street; (510) 444-1233; bocanova.com. Dinner for two, without drinks or tip, is about \$80.

**CAMINO**

Another former Chez Panisse chef is also doing his part to reinvent Oakland as a dining destination. Russell Moore,



CRAIG LEE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The menu at Bocanova, one of the first restaurants in the new Jack London Square in Oakland, was inspired by a restaurant staff's "family meal."