

San Francisco Chronicle

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FOOD + HOME

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Bittersweet journey

*Edward Martinez rises from the
gangs of Fresno to the top
kitchens of San Francisco.*

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MICHAEL BAUER

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Bold bite of the Big Easy

New Orleans charm, classics at the Bywater in Los Gatos

David Kinch is on a roll. Last year he received his third Michelin star at Manresa and opened a bakery next door in Los Gatos. A second Manresa Bread bakery is slated to open later this spring in Los Altos, but in January he opened his second full-service restaurant, also in Los Gatos: the Bywater.

Kinch, one of the most important names in California cuisine, got his start cooking with the late Paul Prudhomme at New Orleans' famous Commander's Palace. With the Bywater, Kinch has created a restaurant that celebrates that connection — and would make any Louisianan proud.

While there is no crossover in style between the refined, carefully imagined preparations at Manresa and the exuberant boldness of the Bywater, visages of fine dining are evident in the service. The staff brings utensils for each course and automatically changes out plates. They are quick to fill water glasses from the bottle on the table, and can answer just about any question on the compact menu that includes about five appetizers, plus a selection of oysters (\$19 for six), and eight or so large plates.

To run the kitchen, Kinch has hired David Morgan, who worked at both Restaurant August in New Orleans and Cyrus in Healdsburg. The blending of cultures is evident in many dishes that offer a slightly lighter take on classics. Oysters Rock-a-fella (\$24) are huge and the deep shells have less sauce and more spinach than would be found in the traditional version, but the flavors are phenomenal. Intensity runs deep in gumbo z'herbes (\$16); the profusion of collard and mustard greens add a chewy texture and ultimately become the star. Salad



The Bywater

Food: ★ ★ ★

Service: ★ ★ 1/2

Atmosphere: ★ ★ 1/2

Prices: \$\$\$

Noise: ▲ ▲ ▲ ▲

532 N. Santa Cruz Ave.
(near Andrews), Los Gatos; (408) 560-9639.
www.thebywaterca.com.
Lunch 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.
Tuesday-Friday. Brunch
11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.
Saturday-Sunday.
Dinner 5-10 p.m.
Tuesday-Thursday and
Sunday; until 11 p.m.
Friday-Saturday. Full bar.
No reservations. Credit
cards accepted.

Beignets at the Bywater, David Kinch's new New Orleans-inspired restaurant in Los Gatos.

for two (\$12) is an impressive mound of greens in a simple vinaigrette not unlike what you might find at the Cafe at Chez Panisse.

I'm still dreaming about the po boy (\$19): dozens of perfectly cooked cornmeal-dusted shrimp on a soft, buttered and toasted bun dressed with shredded lettuce and mayonnaise. They also offer oysters (\$19) and hot links (\$15).

The Bywater produces fried chicken (\$22) that would make Willie Mae smile down from the heavens. It's accompanied by a side dish that's as good as the main event: a bowl of butter beans with a little heat in the background. The pork chop (\$28) looks like it could double as a billy club; the hunk of meat



is enhanced with boudin and served on a bed of black-eyed peas.

Instead of serving green tomatoes (\$14) sliced and fried, the Bywater versions are chunked and served in a broth with anchovies and boiled egg.

Shrimp remoulade (\$15) on the lunch menu is unapologetically bold with powerful hits of horseradish. Red snapper courtbouillon (\$28) is another re-envisioned classic, the broth made with shrimp and sausage sitting below the crisp-skinned



Photos by John Storey / Special to The Chronicle

Mardi Gras beads greet diners at the Bywater. Left: Fried shrimp po boy with fries and Devilcat cocktail.

fillet. The flavors are as intense as I remembered from my trips to New Orleans, but with a gentle roundness and subtle floral quality that give a fresh impression.

Desserts (all \$11) from Stephanie Prida — she also works her magic at Manresa — keep with the bold, straightforward nature of the savory courses: chocolate bread pudding will convert anyone who claims not to like this dessert; rich butter-scotch pot de creme served with two shortbreads, which on my visit were overbaked but still excellent; and beignets dusted with an El Niño snowfall of powdered sugar. The waiter also encouraged us to order a cup of Verve coffee for dunking, which turned out to

be a key component to fully enjoy these puffy fried pastries.

The interior replicates the feel of a classic oyster bar with wood floors, tiled walls and historic photographs and posters. Salvaged gates laced with multicolor glass beads serve as a partition at the entrance of the 40-seat space. Storefront windows feature gold lead letters with taglines like “air-conditioned lounge,” “ice cold beer to go” and “oysters half shell.”

The hexagonal tile floor at the entrance admonishes: “Be nice or leave.” It’s a slogan that sets the tone and is particularly apropos because no reservations are accepted and waits can be long. I overheard one couple on a Monday night tell other diners it was their third and only successful attempt to nab a table. One time the wait was an hour and a half, they said; another it was up to three hours. On this visit, the couple

had the same game plan we did and arrived soon after the 5 p.m. opening. Arriving early on a weekend didn’t work as well. Even by 5:30, every table was filled and people were crowded into the bar, sipping one of the masterfully made cocktails — try the reimagined version of the Hurricane (\$13) or an excellent version of the Sazerac or mint julep (both \$12) — as they waited for a table. Some simply chose to eat at the 10-seat bar, if able to grab a spot.

Maybe it’s the cocktails or the nearly touching tables in the cramped dining room but most people end up conversing with those nearby, reinforcing the genteel Southern theme. The talk is almost always about food.

The surroundings and food are casual, yet the subtle refinement that touches every aspect of the experience makes dining at the Bywater pure pleasure.