

WHAT'S NEW

Amanda Berne, Lynne Char Bennett, Karola Saekel, Deb Wandell
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Trio of new restaurants opens in downtown S.F.

Farmer Brown

On the cusp of downtown and the Tenderloin, Farmer Brown brings a cool scene and neo-soul food to the neighborhood's eclectic culinary mix.

The cuisine: Fresh takes on soul food with an upscale bent. The ingredients are mostly organic and sustainable, with meat and poultry from Fulton Valley Farms, Niman Ranch and Marin Sun Farms. Much of the produce comes through Mo' Better Food, an organization that connects restaurants with Northern California African American farmers.

Appetizers sound heavy, but have a light touch, as in the puffy souffle of crab imperial that replaces the usually dense version; a chopped summer salad loaded with fresh mint and dill; and stone-ground grits with mushrooms and whipped Bellwether ricotta. Main courses are substantial -- a huge pork chop over mashed sweet potatoes and plantains, and a rib-eye steak with a dose of anchovy sage butter -- but save room for the bourbon pecan pie for dessert to go with the Blue Bottle coffee.

Gumbo and po'boys are served at the bar after hours, and are complete with house-made hot sauce. (They'll be available for lunch in about a week.) Cocktails include Southern favorites such as mint juleps.

The team: Chef-owner Jay Foster (formerly of Emmy's Spaghetti Shack and BlueJay Cafe), Deanna Sison and Gwen Ledet.

The vibe: Foster and team made over the former Belon space with warm, modern, slightly industrial touches. Berkeley artist Keba Konte's works highlight the hand-oxidized copper walls, dark brown floors and banquettes and copper tables. The outside is painted a deep, bright blue.

Farmer Brown, 25 Mason St. (at Turk and Market), San Francisco; (415) 409-3276. Dinner nightly 5 p.m.-2 a.m. . Full bar. Reservations for large parties; credit cards accepted. Starters, \$5-\$9; entrees, \$9-\$22; desserts, \$4.

-- Amanda Berne

Bong Su Restaurant & Lounge

A new flower has blossomed in San Francisco's South of Market neighborhood. Bong Su, which means



plumeria in Vietnamese, opened last week in the former Max's Diner location at Third and Folsom.

The cuisine: Refined contemporary Vietnamese. Starters range from five-spice duck, mango and cucumber wrapped in a mustard leaf to sushi-style kampachi garnished with a drizzle of chile-yuzu fish sauce. Entrees include grilled lemongrass, soy-marinated pork chop accompanied by crisp taro dumplings and mustard green stems; and tamarind sauce-glazed five prawns. Coconut tapioca with a roasted pineapple ring and scoop of mango sorbet provides a not-too-sweet ending.

The team: Co-owners Anne Le and Tammy Huyhn, who is also executive chef, have created a beautiful restaurant with a menu similar to their Palo Alto restaurant, Tamarine. Sommelier/maitre'd Peter Greerty and general manger William Redberg offer a nicely crafted wine list.

The vibe: Vietnamese/Southeast Asian with an elegant, modern flair. Engstrom Design Group incorporates Le's imported Vietnamese stonework sculptures with dark walnut, bamboo, tile and fabric in shades of dark chocolate, cream and burnt orange. The sensuous 50-seat lounge showcases a spacious, glass-enclosed wine cellar and a long tile bar, while moveable fabric screens delineate flexible private dining areas in the 140-seat restaurant.

Bong Su Restaurant & Lounge, 311 Third St. (at Folsom), San Francisco; (415) 536-5800. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Dinner nightly. Starters/sides, \$7-\$16; entrees, \$17-\$26; desserts, \$8-\$9.

-- Lynne Char Bennett

Brick

Brick replaces Tappe's Bar and Grill on the edge of the Tenderloin, near blocks upon blocks of city apartment buildings.

The cuisine: Described as modern American with international influences, the menu changes daily, offering small plates. Offbeat salads, such as watermelon done two ways with red peppers, onion, olives and cheddar, are followed by main courses such as skate with crab, green tomatoes, veal jus and mustard glacé; and rack of lamb with lentils, anise and Medjool date puree.

The team: Owners Matt Sturm, Chris Cronk and Leslie Shirah are partners in Solstice and Fly Bar; executive chef Noah Tucker, a Culinary Institute of America graduate, has cooked at several New York restaurants, and at Michael Mina in San Francisco.

The vibe: Century-old brick walls have been exposed and combine with sleek Brazilian hardwood and local art for a sleek, contemporary look. A couple of private areas offer alternatives to the main dining room and its handsome, large bar.

Brick, 1085 Sutter St. (at Larkin), (415) 441-4232. Dinner nightly. Small plates, \$8-\$20; desserts, \$7-\$9.

-- Karola Saekel

SHOPPING CART

Hot off the grill

Want to infuse that just-smoked aroma and flavor into your Memorial Day ribs, chicken or tri-tip roast without soaking wood chips, starting hardwood charcoal or lighting a gas grill? Savu Smoker Bags, a Finnish company's patented invention, uses a triple-ply aluminum bag with a wood chip, hardwood syrup and sugar mixture -- of alder (available now) or hickory (in stores soon) -- sandwiched in the bottom layer.

Each bag holds 2 to 2 1/2 pounds of meat. Combine meat, vegetables and potatoes for a smokin' all-in-one meal. Use the bags on the grill, in the oven or take them camping.

Savu Smoker Bags, \$3.50-\$4, available at Bay Area Draeger's, Safeway, United Markets and other supermarkets and specialty stores; and through Big Acres Gourmet Sauces Web site, bigacres.com.

Cleaning the grill can be an ugly chore. Grate Chef disposable Grill Wipes are coated in restaurant-grade grilling oil that cleans and preps the surface and helps prevent food from sticking. We tested the wipes on a preheated gas grill fired up for pork chops. The chops didn't stick, had nice grill marks, and there was no detectable flavor from the wipes. The best part? Cleanup was a breeze.

Grate Chef Grill Wipes, \$1.99 for a six-pack at Ace Hardware stores.

Also promising easy cleanup is Grill Friends Super Silicone Angled BBQ Mop. Its removable mop head is dishwasher-safe, and the bristles are heat resistant to 500°. Another plus: The long-angled handle allows singe-free slathering.

Grill Friends Super Silicone Angled BBQ Mop, about \$9.95 at Sur La Table stores.

For professional-looking patties, the Burger Mate hand-operated press squeezes out uniform patties. It can be used to make turkey, crab, soy or vegetable burgers, too.

Burger Mate, \$19.95 (plus \$6.95 shipping and handling, available at www.burgermate.com).

-- Karola Saekel and Deb Wandell

DISCOVERIES

Fresh specialty ice creams

Just in time for Memorial Day, we've discovered several unusual, delicious new ice cream and sorbet flavors.

Touted as a new superfood, the açai (ah-sigh-EE) palm berry fruit from the Amazon rain forest is highly perishable and said to be higher in antioxidants than blueberries or pomegranates. Belizza Açai Sorbet uses açai pulp, which tastes of blackberry and chocolate-covered blueberry, as the base for its açai, mango and banana flavors. (\$4.50-\$5 per pint; belizza.com)

Best known for sweet, spicy ginger beer, Reed's also makes three flavors of super-premium ice cream. A

Food staff favorite is the moderately sweet Reed's Original Ginger Ice Cream, flavored with baby gingerroot and studded with large pieces of crystallized ginger. (\$3.65-\$4.09 per pint; reedsgingerbrew.com).

Fig Newtons fans will love LaLoo's rich Black Mission Fig Goat's Milk Ice Cream. This 1 1/2-year-old Sonoma County business uses only goat's milk, which gives the ice cream a slight tang. There's also Vanilla Snowflake, Deep Chocolate and Strawberry Darling, which has swirls of balsamic vinegar. (Eight flavors, from \$6.49-\$7.99 per pint; goatmilkicecream.com)

While strawberry and raspberry ice creams and sorbets are easy to find, other berries are often underrepresented. Gelato Massimo, located in Watsonville, makes a creamy Italian-style blueberry sorbet with bits of darker, more intense blueberry fruit. (\$4.69-\$5.99 per pint; gelatomassimo.com)

Specialty ice creams and sorbets available at various Bay Area Andronico's, Draeger's, Mollie Stone's and Whole Foods markets; Farmer Joe's and the Pasta Shop, Oakland; and Rainbow Grocery, San Francisco.

-- Lynne Char Bennett

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