

# RESTAURANTS

MICHAEL BAUER *Between Meals*

## Esteemed chef keeps Acquerello fresh

This is Chronicle restaurant critic Michael Bauer's *Between Meals* column, an update of the restaurants he visits as he searches for the next Top 100 Restaurants. His main dining reviews, which include a ratings box, are written only after three or more visits.

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The #MeToo movement has started serious conversations about restaurants and the lack of women in the kitchen.

That said, the Bay Area has always been home to exceptional female chefs like Alice Waters, Joyce Goldstein and Nancy Oakes.

A name that's often left off this list is Suzette Gresham of Acquerello. That restaurant and Dominique Crenn's Atelier Crenn are the only two-star Michelin restaurants in the Bay Area run by women.

Gresham and her business partner, Giancarlo Paterlini, opened Acquerello 29 years ago, and she has managed to keep the menu fresh through nearly three decades. It's a restaurant that successfully bridges generations.

On a recent visit, I was reminded how good this restaurant is, even as it finishes its third decade.

The interior, with high-beamed ceilings, carpeted floor and tables set with white tablecloths, fresh roses and crystal candleholders, has a feel that is quickly disappearing in fine dining restaurants. There's plenty of room between tables to wheel in the cheese cart before dessert, and the sweets cart, which is filled with more than a dozen small candies, chocolates and cakes, afterward.

Gresham offers so many specialties that they could fill an entire menu on their own — items like her Parmesan budino; pasta with foie gras, truffles and Marsala; and her cuttlefish cut to look like spaghetti. But she's savvy enough to know that these items would make the menu stagnant, so they are removed from the written menu. You can request them, of course. Sometimes, they are sent out as gifts from the kitchen before dinner even begins.

Given the food's quality, the fixed price menu is one of the best bargains in San Francisco. The 20 items on the



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Suzette Gresham, at Acquerello, has kept the Italian menu fresh for nearly 30 years as the restaurant bridges classic and contemporary in a comfortable setting that seems to be disappearing from S.F.

**"I encourage my younger cooks to contribute so there's always a source of newness."**

Suzette Gresham, Acquerello chef

skins tops her turbot, with the brown butter sauce underneath with dots of green garlic, olives and clams out of their shell.

Pastry chef Riccardo Menicucci is her equal at desserts, creating a kind of deconstructed carrot cake with chocolate, walnuts and carrot gelato; and a millefoglie with chocolate hazelnut and banana, arranged on a plate in something resembling an American Indian design.

The sweets cart that comes after dessert really telescopes his talent with tiny cakes, chocolate-covered oranges, bonbons filled with caramel and lollipops with chocolate and walnuts.

The cart ends the evening on a high that has no lows. Which says a lot about this long-lived restaurant.

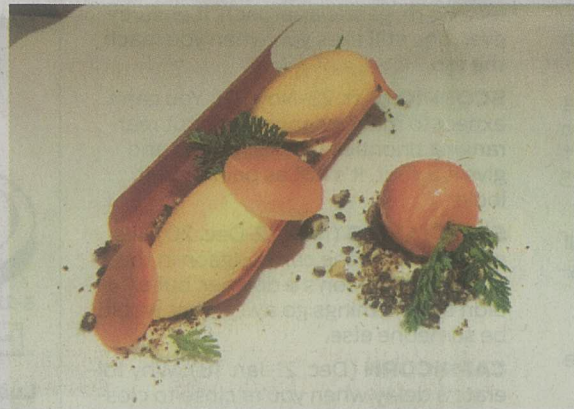
1722 Sacramento (between Polk and Van Ness), San Francisco; (415) 567-5432. [www.acquerello.com](http://www.acquerello.com). Dinner Tuesday-Saturday.

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Michael Bauer / The Chronicle

Arctic char with artichokes, durum wheat couscous and tomato brodetto.



Michael Bauer / The Chronicle

Acquerello's deconstructed carrot cake with chocolate, walnuts and carrot gelato.

menu can be mixed and matched, as at La Folie and Gary Danko. Three courses cost \$105, four are \$130, and five go for \$150. Gresham also creates a 10-course tasting menu for \$195 that showcases her wide-ranging talent. Acquerello is the only tasting-menu restaurant to celebrate Italian cuisine. (Quince has some Italian touches, but Michael Tusk is doing a broader-based menu.)

When I called Gresham after my visit to learn her secret of staying fresh through three decades, she became as excited as a new chef just starting her career.

"Philosophically speaking, because I'm older I have to be open-minded," she said. "I encourage my younger cooks to contribute so there's always a source of newness. I wouldn't say we are trendy, but I do think we're current."

Gresham talks like a teacher, and last year she took her sous chef to Italy. When cooks come

up with new recipes, she grills them about the ingredients, the technique and the inspiration — all in an attempt to make sure the dish stays within the Italian parameters.

What sets her food apart is the way she weaves traditional and modern elements together. She uses buckwheat in a delicate porcelain-thin crostata, filling the shell with bufala mozzarella, artichokes, pea shoots and other vegetables to create a dish that feels like spring. Riffing on the traditional Venetian seafood salad, she creates a fresh, stylized version with slices of mackerel, calamari, pickled shrimp, trout roe, finger lime and delicate crisps black from squid ink.

One of her pasta courses features rustic short rib sugo, refined with the knife technique of cutting the meat and vegetable in precise cubes. On top she then adds roasted potato and

fontina cappelletti with hen of the wood mushrooms and bright-yellow broccoli flowers. In another pasta dish she

hides the soft lobster and potato gnocchi under a frothy mound of truffle butter.

A weave of potato

