

This Time It's Persianal

Hoss Zaré returns to the Fly Trap with a new Middle Eastern–accented menu.

By Meredith Brody

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Jen Siska



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You call it lamb shank; the Persians call it abgusht.

Where:

606 Folsom (at Second St.)

Details:

243-0580,

www.zareflytrap.com.

Monday-Friday 11

a.m.-midnight; Saturday

6 p.m.- midnight; bar open

until 1 a.m. Closed

Sunday. Reservations

accepted. Wheelchair

accessible. Parking: street,

difficult. Muni: 9X, 10, 12,

30, 45, 76. Noise level:

moderate.

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Hunger is only one of the reasons we eat in restaurants, and perhaps the least important. There are many more desires eating out can fulfill: the pleasure we take in luxurious and interesting surroundings, being served like royalty, having new experiences. There's the social aspect: dining with friends, seeing and being seen, perhaps meeting new people — even enjoying a little inadvertent eavesdropping. Nowadays the armchair traveler can also be a dining-chair traveler, sampling dishes that are copies of what you'd be eating thousands of miles away — or, in fusion fashion, borrowing ingredients and inspirations from many different cuisines to create a whole new personal style.

A recent dinner at Zaré at Fly Trap reminded us of just how satisfying eating out can be. I approached its new — or perhaps I should say newest — incarnation with a bit of trepidation. I had been very fond of the Fly Trap as it was: an old-fashioned white-tablecloth place with a pressed-tin ceiling and walls papered with old prints, whose classically "continental" menu featured grilled steaks and chops; calf's liver with bacon; coq au vin; and, most excitingly for me, several offal dishes including kidneys, brains, and sweetbreads. There was also a gleaming baby grand in the window near the long, equally gleaming bar, with live music on offer several nights a week. I liked it so much that I named it Best Under-the-Radar Restaurant in our 2007 Best Of issue.

A few months ago, the place was taken over by Hoss Zaré, a native of Iran. Not at all coincidentally, he worked in the Fly Trap kitchen when he moved to San Francisco in 1986. In those days, he thought he was merely cooking to pay for college, but he realized that he loved the work and became the Fly Trap's head chef for several years, leaving in 1992 for Ristorante Ecco in South Park and Aromi on Polk. Zaré later served his own personal style of Mediterranean cuisine, combining Italian, Greek, Spanish, and Middle Eastern influences, first at the somewhat Frenchified Zaré on Sacramento and then at the more casual Bistro Zaré in the old Aromi space. In 2005, he left San Francisco and opened Zaré Napa, but the chance to come full circle and own the restaurant where he'd discovered his vocation drew him back to the city.

I was reassured to discover that the new Fly Trap looked just like the old one — only better. The tin ceiling, the eccentrically papered walls, and the long bar remain. The old dark columns have been painted a warm and inviting deep red. The white linen has been jettisoned, and new polished wood tabletops shine under sophisticated lighting. Two medium-sized communal tables roost in the window where the piano once stood.

But the new menu couldn't be more different. A casual glance takes in a myriad of exciting ingredients from all over the map: curry, verjus, pickled jalapeño, harissa, honey, pomegranate, bergamot, chestnuts, chickpeas, fregola, preserved lime, saffron. I've rarely seen so many different dishes I wanted to order.

It was a real wrench to choose only four dishes from among the dozen offered as appetizers and four under the salad rubric. We enjoyed a bowl full of tender mussels and clams in a saffron broth amped up with chiles and garlic (\$13). The seven-spice mushroom kebab (\$12) was perplexing. We expected a hot dish, but what we got was a pretty plate of what we would call a cold mushroom salad, with plenty of lightly grilled

tomatoes and peppers, assorted lettuces, and halved red mavro wine grapes the size of small plums in a light dressing that betrayed little of the famed seven spices (paprika, cumin, coriander, cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, and cardamom). The sumac couscous salad (\$14) was pleasantly toothsome, full of chopped watercress, tomato, and serrano chiles and flecked with mildly briny Dungeness crab.

The "ménage a foie" (\$15) featured an exquisite bit of seared foie gras atop tiny tart huckleberries; a thicker chunk of the seldom seen sheep liver between a slice of pickled jalapeño and roasted roma tomatoes; and a rare chicken liver paired with onion marmalade and a touch of aged balsamic vinegar, with a dab of fresh apple chutney on the side. All three were perched atop overtoasted, oddly hard brioche that did nothing to enhance them and were quickly ignored.

We agreed that Zaré's appetizer portions were large enough to serve as light main courses. A group could assemble a number of appetizers, tapas-style — perhaps the grilled sardines with corona beans and basil (\$12), pistachio meatballs in a harissa-honey-pomegranate glaze (\$12), spice-roasted bone marrow with bergamot preserve (\$10), or cinnamon-braised lamb tongue (\$12).

I may have been more intrigued by the starters, but we were considerably more wowed by the main courses. The two long-cooked braised meat dishes were divine: a massive lamb shank, called abgusht (\$24), with flageolet beans, fingerling potatoes, and the snap of preserved lime; and a much smaller but equally satisfying single-bone short rib (\$23) rising from a hillock of risotto Milanese in a sea of beefy juices. A thin grilled slab of Alaska wild salmon (\$22), cooked somewhat beyond the medium-rare promised, was mildly seasoned with Moroccan spices, including cumin. We were more beguiled by its sauces, a fresh cucumber raita and a spicy cilantro one, and its bed of toasted fregola mixed with minced aromatics including carrots and celery.

The most unusual dish, served only on Mondays, was a huge, steaming veal-and-pork meatball studded with pistachios and pine nuts, which our server broke open to reveal a whole plump quail dressed with dried apricots and barberries (\$25). It sat in a lake of meaty broth, accompanied by roasted tomatoes, broccoli rabe, and a little dish of torshi, a tart, vinegary Persian vegetable relish. I've never had anything like it before, and I would order it again.

As I would Zaré's perfect french fries (\$5), also a huge portion, which came with a rich aioli. We were less enthralled with the plate of lavash and herb bread (\$4), which came with ramekins of feta-walnut spread and tapenade. No other bread is offered, which seems a bit of a shame when there are so many dishes with soppable sauces.

Zaré's wine list is unusually interesting and personal; we were tempted to try wines from Lebanon or Greece, but were very happy with the light Spanish Bodegas Vizcarra Tempranillo (\$32) after the Venta Mazzaron Tempranillo (\$28) we tried to order proved to be the only bottle not available. There's also an unusually exciting cocktail menu (all \$10).

Desserts are the creation of ex-*Top Chef* contestant Marisa Churchill, whose sophisticated sweets we'd enjoyed at Yoshi's. The goat cheese cheesecake (\$9) was airy and light, while the slightly alcoholic mojito sorbet (\$6) was tart and icy. The yogurt panna cotta with white truffle honey (\$9) tasted exactly like the Greek Fage yogurt you can buy around town. The star was a stack of torrijas (\$9), brioche soaked in milk and then fried, a sort of magical version of churros, dusted with powdered sugar and served with a hot chocolate sauce scented with rosewater.

The hundred-year history claimed for the Fly Trap (it was originally on Market, then Sutter, then Golden Gate) is a bit suspect, especially since we suspect there was a lot of down time — decades, in fact — before the place on Folsom took the name. But with its new owner, menu, and freshened-up room, it's poised for the second hundred in the new millennium.