

Tracey and Mark Berkner are owners of Taste in Plymouth, Amador County. He is the chef and she is the hostess. Dishes from the menu include roasted rabbit, foreground, and halibut au poivre.
Sacramento Bee/Erhardt Krause

"You know, this dish just about has me convinced to be a vegetarian again," he says, looking up from his potato gnocchi, finished with porcini and shiitake mushrooms and maybe a morel or two (\$16).



"This dish convinces me never to think about vegetarianism again," she responds, looking up from her filet mignon, topped with a buttery pat of Gorgonzola and diced walnuts, its sweetness echoed with slices of caramelized Asian pear and a savory ginger and peppercorn caramel sauce (\$32).

They'll work it out, I'm sure. But that's the essence of dishes at the new restaurant Taste in Plymouth: They provoke as much as they please. They do it mostly with an adventurous but grounded creativity, a menu notable for its variety and the excited use of seasonal and regional ingredients.

Seasonal appropriateness has been a familiar theme in inventive California restaurants for three decades now, but at Taste, executive chef Mark Berkner, chef de cuisine T.J. Bennett and sous chef Robert Grantham look to be lighter on their feet than many of their contemporaries as they pursue that standard. They tweak the menu virtually daily to take advantage of ingredients at their prime.

The foresty richness of the mushrooms with the gnocchi, for one, was balanced with the sugar and snap of corn kernels from ears that could have been picked that morning in Brentwood.

The next day, the source of the corn or the type of mushroom could change. The constant in the dish is that Berkner can be counted on to retain its freshness and equilibrium.

While Taste is new, Berkner and his wife, Tracey, have been a presence on the Amador County culinary scene for nearly a decade. In 1997 they bought the historic St. George Hotel in Volcano and revitalized it in part with an

inspired interpretation of New American cookery.

They sold the hotel in 2003, took some time to travel and then bought the former Sportsman Bar along Main Street in Plymouth. Then they spent more than a year basically rebuilding the joint, from foundation to roof. But they hung on to the weathered art deco-style bar itself, refurbishing it so it fits right in with the mahogany tables and the gleaming floors, made of the hardwood machiche from a sustainably harvested forest in Guatemala.

In its refinement and ambition, Taste is a departure for Plymouth, one of the last Gold Rush camps along Highway 49 to be gentrified. In its quietude and amusements -- shuffleboard at the rustic Plymouth Hotel -- the city is still Pokerville, which never really was the city's name, though that's what it occasionally is called, stemming from an early misspelling of the local Puckerville Mining District.

At any rate, like other Mother Lode communities Plymouth is changing, with new residential development, a sprucing-up of older places, and signs of enterprise in the business district. An old-time welding shop is across the side street from Taste, but the restaurant faces a well-shaded park with a cute bandstand across the main drag.

While cohesive and natty with its Tuscan colors, stylized flatware, servers all in black, and vases of fresh flowers -- and fresh water in the vases, something overlooked by many restaurants -- Taste isn't at all stuffy, though by its understated sophistication it does encourage guests to dress to draw appreciative glances.

Jazz comes over the sound system at a level spirited but not overpowering. A corner of the bar is given over to small historic photos of Plymouth, but the photos to catch your eye and leave a lasting impression are Larry Angier's large and vigorous shots of the foothill landscape. Overall, the restaurant has the feeling of a postmodern Grange hall all polished up for the retirement dinner of a farmer who has been growing grapes in the area for 70 years. It can get that kind of loud, too.

Berkner's cooking, inspired largely by the cuisines of the Mediterranean and California, has become more daring since he moved from Volcano to Plymouth. Regardless of whether his nerve has been encouraged by his travels or by the restaurant's proximity to the adventurous palates of Rancho Murieta just to the west and of the Shenandoah Valley wine community just to the east, his cooking is fresher, brighter and more international and original than it was during his years at the St. George.

He's fond of fresh herbs, sweetness and spice, jazzy notes of which punctuate virtually every dish. Two degrees of spice accompanied succulent seared scallops, once in the contrasting crispness of their lentil crust, again in the heat of their pepper sauce (\$12).

Sweetness was similarly twofold with the "halibut au poivre," the thick and moist white flesh of the fish brightened with both a creamy but light choron sauce (basically a hollandaise seasoned with tomato) and a richly fruity

tomato concassé, or what the menu listed as tomato "fondue" (\$20).

Fresh herbs stood out in several dishes, including the spirited oregano vinaigrette that dressed the "Green Goddess salad" of butter lettuce, roasted tomato, kalamata olives and feta cheese (\$7.50).

A couple of dishes verged on the eccentric yet kept their balance, such as a refreshingly cold and creamy lavender-hued soup based on purple Okinawan sweet potatoes (\$6), and a sweet-potato pancake not far removed from egg foo yong, complete with brown sauce. Resting on the pancake was roasted rabbit, meaty and rich with both a whole-grain mustard sauce and robust mustard greens (\$24).

We ate at Taste three times, and with each visit the food became more focused and coherent. In addition to the filet mignon and the gnocchi, our most recent dinner included an aromatic soup of sweet potato, lemon grass, coconut and corn dappled with bright green dots of kaffir-lime oil (\$6), and "mushroom cigars" -- a harmonious blend of porcini, cremini and shiitake mushrooms with herbs and goat cheese, wrapped with buttery and flaky pastry dough, fried to a delicate crispness and served with a forthright mushroom sauce (\$9.50).

Desserts were a kick. Some are reinventions of classic American sweets -- mini eclairs of whipped cream and the fruit of the moment, lemon one evening, strawberries another (\$7); an individual Boston cream pie with excellent vanilla cream and a bit too much of the housemade chocolate sauce, though chocolate lovers won't object (\$7); and a warm ginger cake that was a bit dry and dull one visit, but fresher, richer and spicier another (\$7). Others are inspired novelties, most notably a tropical fruit brûlée, slices of pineapple and banana coated with thin, glassy, crackly fired sugar and a scoop of mango sorbet (\$7).

Chocolate enthusiasts will be torn between the Boston cream pie and "chocolate, chocolate, chocolate," three small but intense variations on the theme -- a dense and creamy pot de crème in an espresso cup, blooming with the richness of fine chocolate; a trufflelike square of chocolate cake; and a rich yet refreshing chocolate gelato (\$10).

The Berkners have put as much energy into their beverage selection -- the list is called "liquid taste" -- as the rest of the operation. In addition to a wine list respectful of Sierra foothill wines, but also appreciative of the strengths of other regions, the choices include Navarro Winery's highly regarded nonalcoholic grape juices and a beer menu so intriguing that local winemakers are apt to be applying pressure on the Berkners to ease up.

One night when we were absolutely too parched to consider wine we discovered from the list the marvelously sweet, smoky and easy-drinking MacTarnahan's Amber Ale from Oregon (\$4).

While the wine list is made up mostly of younger wines, several releases are from older vintages, the best buy being the intricately layered Domaine de la Terre Rouge 1997 Sierra Foothills Noir (\$37), a medium-bodied blend of

black Rhone Valley varieties that express themselves in a captivating range of flavors, from a ripeness hinting of raisins to a freshness suggestive of newly picked berries.

Service could occasionally lag, but servers were earnest and upbeat; if they didn't know the answer to a question they said they would get an answer, and they did with a consistency not generally seen in restaurants.

Taste is an exciting addition to the Northern California dining scene, giving wine enthusiasts visiting wineries about Plymouth an accessible and fresh destination for dinner.

Taste

9402 Main St., Plymouth, Amador County
(209) 245-3463

3 1/2 stars / \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$

FOOD: Since selling the St. George Hotel in Volcano and opening Taste in Plymouth, Mark Berkner has loosened up and become more adventurous in his artful interpretation of contemporary Mediterranean and Californian cooking.

AMBIENCE: Mark and Tracey Berkner basically have rebuilt the funky old Sportsman Bar along Plymouth's Main Street, yet while providing a sleek restaurant they have kept the building's historic profile and feel.

HITS: The wine list is extensive but manageable, and while partial to foothill producers it isn't provincial, with Italy, France and other California regions represented smartly; note some older vintages in the selection, a rarity for new restaurants.

MISSSES: Servers, though personable and earnest, occasionally let their timing get thrown off.

HOURS: Dinner only, served 5-9 p.m. Thursday through Monday.

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<http://www.sacticket.com/dining/story/14287499p-15107185c.html>