

Cultural Daily

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San Francisco's Delfina Revitalizes Mission Cuisine

R. Daniel Foster · Tuesday, November 14th, 2023

I hadn't been to San Francisco in about eight years, so I was eager to see the beloved city again. The problem was, that more than one friend told me San Francisco had gone so far downhill that it wasn't worth my trouble. I think they browse social media too much. I found the city to be as charming as ever. I stayed in the financial district and made forays from there.

One of my stops was the Mission District, which friends told me had become especially ragged. Not true, and a real standout, just a block or so from Dolores Park, is a San Francisco mainstay—[Delfina](#). The James Beard award-winning trattoria reopened about a year ago after owners Craig and Annie Stoll orchestrated a nearly-year renovation. They combined their main restaurant with Pizzeria Delfina next door.

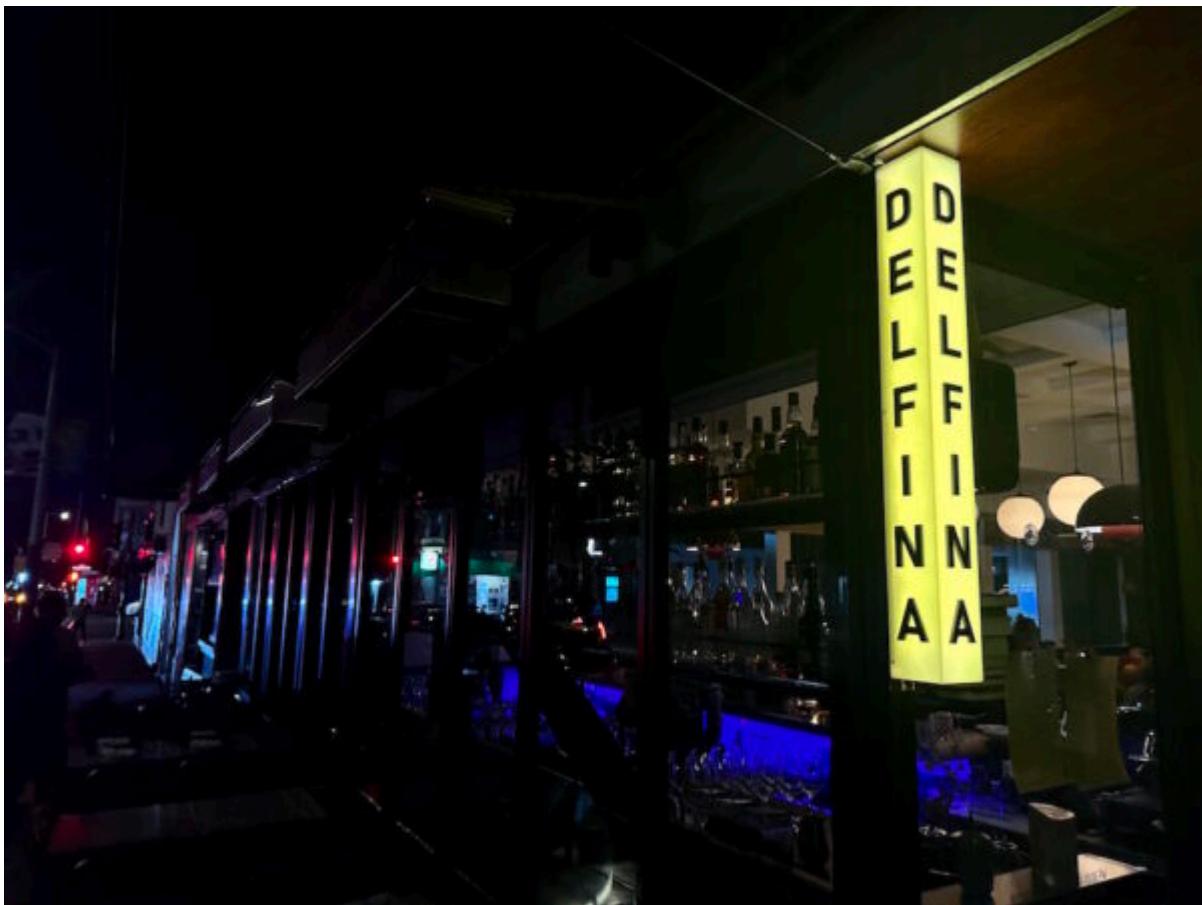


Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Delfina's Tuscany roots

Delfina's Cal-Italian cuisine originated with Craig Stoll's stint at [Ristorante da Delfina](#) in [Artimino](#), a small village about 12 miles from Florence. Via other Italian travels, Stoll came to realize how the Bay Area and Tuscany share geography, agriculture, and climate. His wife Annie is the face of the establishment and organizes the staff with her team-building skills. Craig Stoll and Chef de Cuisine [John Arcudi](#) master the ever-changing menu. In 2001, *Food & Wine* named Craig Stoll its Best New Chef.

Chef Arcudi is a Bay Area native born into an Italian-American family. During the decade he's been with Delfina, he's bought from local farmers, including Stoll's farm in Sonoma.

Delfina's award-winning focaccia, new to the menu since the reopening, landed on our table right from the start. The Stolls had long wanted to bake bread in-house, and artisan bread baker [Michael Kalanty](#) made their dream come true. Kalanty is the author of the popular "[How to Bake Bread](#)" series. He doesn't disappoint. The airy chunk of split bread was a delight—it's inspired by Roman pizza bianca, which is made with a leaner dough. The focaccia takes the shape of a ciabatta, which is baked with a much higher hydration level, creating larger holes within the dough.



Delfina's award-winning focaccia / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The Main Meal

From there, we moved on to Red Cow Parmigiano Sformato with figs, hazelnuts, and aceto balsamico tradizionale, made in the Italian province of Modena. The balsamico had a deep,

lustrous dark brown, nearly red color—all perfectly balanced between sweet and sour. The Parmigiano cake was warm and delectable while at once light and creamy—it's cave-aged for two years. The figs and nuts added an optimal texture counterbalance.

My favorite dish of the night (actually, a close tie with the Wood-Grilled Short Rib Stracotta for two) was the Smoked Eggplant Agnolotti with burst cherry tomatoes and basil. The pasta had a subtle smooth finish; it was just delectable. So was the rib, served with cardoon-potato gratinata. Cardoons are a type of thistle in the sunflower family. They have an earthy mild sweetness, similar to celery root or artichoke hearts.



The Smoked Eggplant Agnolotti was a winner / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

We ordered the Pavlova for dessert, which came in a whipped tower, filled with almond gelato, Moscato roasted stone fruit, raspberry, and creme anglaise. The chef also presented us with the Buttermilk Panna Cotta, which became my favorite. The signature dish is flavored with chamomile and pistachio—its texture provided the ultimate mouth feel of about any dessert I've sampled.

Cocktails and Wine

My Negroni Nostrano cocktail was smooth and rich, without any of the trademark bitterness, and I

sampled a glass of Pinot Nero from the Alto Adige region, by Ignaz Niedrist, created in Trentino-Alto Adige, Italy. It was an optimal pairing, especially with the rib, given its notes of strawberry and espresso. The magazine Wine Enthusiast also detects dried red berry, rhubarb, and dill. But lacking a true nose for wine, those flavors escaped me. Delfina's wine list features about 50 selections from California and Italy.



Pinot Nero from the Alto Adige region / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Delfina's floor-to-ceiling renovation, now with 115 seats, presents a homey yet classic feel with alcove booths painted a smoky blue, inset with large portraits of Julia Child and James Beard. There's a private room with a vaulted ceiling. There's also a parklet at the location—18th and Guerrero streets.

There are four Pizzeria Delfina locations in the Bay Area. Delfina also books [private events](#), and you can follow the restaurant on [Instagram](#) as well.



Buttermilk Panna Cotta / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

The Gilded Age Palace Hotel

Since I stayed in the Financial District, I stopped in at the nearby [Palace Hotel](#) built in 1909 after the famed 1906 earthquake leveled the original 1875 building. Venerable and grand as ever and flawlessly maintained, the hotel's welcoming Garden Court is a marvel of soaring glass. I booked an afternoon tea there—seemed a civilized thing to do in the city that had supposedly gone so downhill.

The Palace was ranked among [the top 12 Hotels in San Francisco](#) by the CNN Traveler's Readers' Choice Awards this year. Marriott International now manages the hotel.

[Afternoon tea](#) is served, of course, on fine china and is accompanied by a harpist. There are the traditional finger sandwiches—from the standard cucumber to prosciutto, as well as egg salad with black truffle. Also, baked scones and assorted pastries. Among other variations, the basic signature tea is \$105. For \$120, a glass of *Veuve Clicquot* is included.

Above, the Garden Court's \$7 million stained glass ceiling is a standout, created with 72,000 pieces of glass. The room is flanked by a double row of massive Italian marble Ionic columns and is anchored with enormous crystal chandeliers.



The Palace's afternoon tea / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

An Original Maxfield Parrish

When visiting the Palace, be sure to view the original Maxfield Parrish painting, the Pied Piper of Hamelin, created for the hotel's reopening in 1909. The [6-by-15-foot painting](#) with its 30 characters hangs over the bar in the Pied Piper Bar & Grill.



Maxfield Parrish's The Pied Piper of Hamelin / Photo: R. Daniel Foster

Primavera's Famed Chilaquiles

For breakfast, we walked to the [Ferry Plaza Farmers Market](#), a city favorite that launched in 1993. We tried what has been called the [best chilaquiles in the city](#), made by Primavera, a wholesale tamale and tortilla business. There's always a long line at the Primavera booth but the wait is worth it. Bon Appetite has named the chilaquiles as being "unparalleled." Others have called them the best "chilaquiles in the world." That might be a bit of a hyperbole. But maybe not. I haven't tasted any better.

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