

Global Values: 170 Wines for \$20 or Less

# Wine Spectator

www.winespectator.com

## The Best of Australia

- ABCs of Its Wines and Terroir
- Great Aussie Reds: 633 Rated
- Top Hotels, Restaurants

Rich White Burgundies

Stunning California Pinots



OCT. 15, 2005

\$4.95 US \$5.95 CAN

422



# Cyrus, El Dorado Kitchen

*Hot spots in Sonoma wine country*

BY HARVEY STEIMAN

**W**hen someone mentions wine-country dining in Northern California, what comes to mind are the big-deal restaurants in Napa Valley. But things are looking up on the Sonoma side of the mountains, particularly in Healdsburg, whose several good dining spots include star chef Charlie Palmer's 4-year-old Dry Creek Kitchen and newcomer Cyrus.

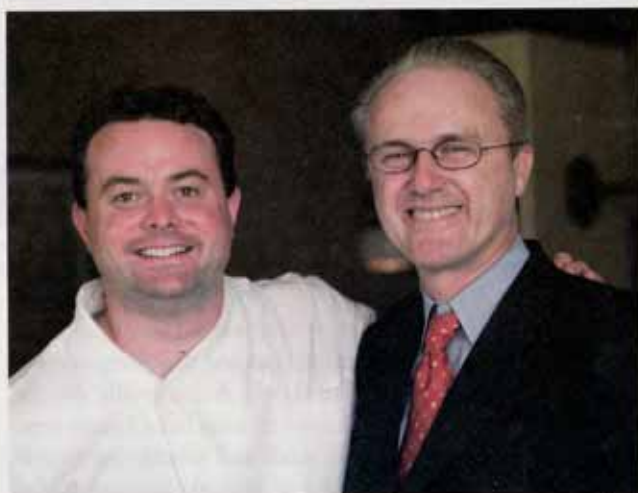
Just opened this past spring in the lavish Les Mars Hotel (around the corner from Palmer's trendy Hotel Healdsburg), Cyrus raises the bar several notches. With a mansard roof, vaulted ceilings and old-fashioned plaster walls, the building looks like a French chateau and announces itself as luxurious and expensive.

The restaurant's co-owners, Nick Peyton and Douglas Keane, met at Gary Danko (one of San Francisco's top restaurants and a *Wine Spectator* Grand Award winner), where Peyton was maître d' and Keane was a sous chef. They teamed up in 2002 to open the casual Market in St. Helena, Calif. But both wanted something more ambitious. After all, Peyton has presided over some of the classiest dining rooms in Northern California since 1965, including Masa's and the Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton (where he met chef Danko), and Keane has cooked in New York with Gray Kunz at Lespinasse and in San Francisco as Traci Des Jardins' chef de cuisine at Jardinière. Cyrus gives them the scope that Market could not.

Textured yellow paint on the walls lends the dining room a warm feel, atmospheric landscape photographs catch the eye and an oversize floral display dominates the center of the restaurant. It might seem a bit over-the-top when Peyton picks up an antique French phone at the entrance to tell the chef which party is arriving, but it says that you're being cared for personally.

Peyton's dissertations on the various caviars available for hors d'oeuvres fascinated me, though some might find them too long. Similarly, every selection on the cheese cart, which offers about a dozen offbeat options covering unexpected corners of France, England, California and Australia, has a story. These and other subtleties, such as the tiny iron buckets containing sea salt, send the message that every detail has been thoroughly considered.

The caviar cart is a major temptation and at \$75 to \$160 per ounce, its wares can easily run up the check. Six bottles of Champagne, including Krug Grande Cuvée and Laurent-Perrier Brut Rosé, protrude from a gigantic ice bucket situated at one end of the cart. A mound of ice holds tins of Russian beluga, Iranian osetra and caviars from California and Uruguay. Intrigued by Peyton's tale of the Russian émigré who started the South



Cyrus co-owners Douglas Keane (left) and Nick Peyton are no strangers to the restaurant business or each other; the two met while working together at top San Francisco restaurant Gary Danko, and later partnered to open Market in St. Helena, Calif.

American operation on an unpolluted stretch of river, I sample the Uruguayan roe. It's intense, if a bit soft, and tastes wonderful on the long slice of fingerling potato provided in lieu of toast or blini.

Keane is completely in his element here, creating dishes that look and taste unfussy even though the descriptions make them seem complicated. The elements fit together seamlessly, and the flavors and textures show remarkable subtlety.

The foie gras is garnished with a drizzle of reduced Riesling, thick as honey but lifted by the wine's natural acidity, and served with inch-wide crumpets, a Riesling jelly topped with rhubarb compote and microgreens. The diverse elements strike a perfect balance.

A first course of scallop sevice is, suprisingly, not tart and tastes more like a scallop carpaccio in a mild, creamy tomato vinaigrette. Razor-thin wheels of lemon cucumber are layered between the slices of seafood. Drops of scallion oil and a microgreens salad of sprouts, radish and pickled okra complete the well-prepared ensemble.



Plenty of windows and a long communal table that dominates the center of the room provide patrons of El Dorado Kitchen with a casual dining experience, and the food by chef Ryan Fancher is top-notch.

The deliciously gamy edge of the roasted quail contrasts nicely with the sweetness of melted figs and the meaty notes of locally foraged mousseron mushrooms. A diagonally divided cube of seared ahi finds a soul mate in a sea bean (marsh sapphire) and cellophane noodle salad and reaches perfection when eaten with the little wedge of avocado tempura resting on top. The rich, braised short ribs look solid but fall apart at the touch of a fork. This kitchen gets the technical details so right that Keane's ideas can soar.

Pastry chef Annie Clemmons also creates some great stuff, including a sensational caramel soup with kettle corn sorbet and a dome of chocolate filigree.

Three courses will run you \$58; four, \$69; and five, \$80. Twenty-four savory items and six desserts are listed, and you can order any combination: The kitchen will adjust the portions accordingly. There is also a seven-course chef's menu for \$95. The caviar is extra.

Sommelier Jason Alexander, who also previously worked at Gary Danko, has started Cyrus off with a list of 600 labels. The California pages read like a who's who of popular wines, including Marcassin, Peter Michael and Ramey Chardonnays, as well as Tor, Rudd and Viader Cabernets. The Bordeaux list offers some choice options dating to the 1980s, such as Château Margaux 1986 (\$750) and Château L'Évangile 1983 (\$285), and a vertical of Jean-Louis Chave includes the Hermitage 1983 (\$350), but a large portion of the imported reds are from recent vintages.

Alexander has a nice touch when it comes to matching wines,

which are offered by the glass with the menus, from \$28 (for three courses) to \$56 (for the seven-course chef's menu). His pick of Hiedler Grüner Veltliner Maximum 2002 (\$85) was generous enough to wrap around the meaty seared ahi, and the Roth Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley 2002 (not yet listed) had the plump texture and rich fruit necessary to pair well with the short ribs.

As extravagant as the Cyrus experience is, a new spot from an experienced crew at the other end of Sonoma County is doing some pretty good cooking in a simpler vein. The cuisine at El Dorado Kitchen in Sonoma might not be as elevated as what chef Ryan Fancher prepared as sous chef at the French Laundry, but it is every bit as technically adept.

It's rare to find a casual restaurant where fritto misto arrives perfectly crisp and without a speck of oiliness. Fancher uses whole haricots verts and slices of Jerusalem artichokes and baby fennel, and they are addictive. The asparagus soup has a clear, pure flavor, accented by lemon-scented crème fraîche. The baked salmon fillet has real depth of character and gets extra richness from its base of onion fondue and crisp lardons. As for desserts, the buttermilk panna cotta has a beautifully silky texture.

The room looks sharp and, with its many windows, feels open and airy. Two rectangular basket-weave light fixtures hover over a long communal table that dominates the room. There's also a patio for warm evenings and relaxed lunches.

The one disappointment is the wine list. All California and heavily Sonoma, its 70 choices are on the curt side. The food is classy enough to want better selections than what the decidedly midrange list offers. However, if you want to bring something more interesting, corkage is only \$15 a bottle.

The restaurant has deep roots in wine country, and El Dorado should grow into yet another satisfying Sonoma restaurant. Fancher's managing partner is Tim Harmon, whose father, Bob, and Claude Rouas built Auberge du Soleil in Napa Valley in 1987 and subsequently started the Piatti chain. El Dorado is on the site of the old Piatti in Sonoma. The original Piatti in Yountville has been redone as Redd, featuring ex-Auberge chef Richard Reddington. Reddington was at the top of his game when he left Auberge, and his new venture could raise the bar in Sonoma even higher. □

### Cyrus

29 North St., Healdsburg Telephone (707) 433-3311 Web site [www.cyrusrestaurant.com](http://www.cyrusrestaurant.com) Open Dinner, Wednesday to Monday Cost Tasting menus \$58-\$95 Corkage \$25 Credit cards All major

### El Dorado Kitchen

405 First St. W., Sonoma Telephone (707) 996-3030 Web site [www.eldoradosonoma.com](http://www.eldoradosonoma.com) Open Lunch and dinner, daily Cost Entrées \$17-\$26 Corkage \$15 Credit cards All major