

Zaré at Fly Trap specializes in strong flavors

Michael Bauer

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It's been a tough year, a time of re-evaluation and a return home for Hoss Zaré, a popular chef who has been on the Bay Area dining scene for more two decades. Though he came to the Bay Area from Iran to study medicine, he found his passion in cooking.

He came to prominence in the 1990s at Zaré on Sacramento and a couple of years ago moved it to Napa, where the restaurant struggled. Then last year, after a family tragedy, he realized he had decisions to make. He closed his Napa restaurant, moved back to the city and bought Fly Trap, where he had worked from 1989 to 1992. It was like coming home.

This classic San Francisco restaurant, now called Zaré at Fly Trap, has weathered 20 years in the same location. The food has been up and down, but the interior still looks fresh. With its handsome decor, including architectural and botanical prints on the wall separated by brass strips, Zaré was wise enough to make only minimal changes, painting the beige walls in the bar area a cinnabar color.

The food, which included dishes like celery Victor, now has Zaré's brash stamp. He's a chef who doesn't believe in subtlety, using strong flavors with a Middle Eastern twist. The combination of such ingredients as bergamot, house-made curry, sumac and Persian pickles is always interesting, even if the flavors aren't always balanced.

He's already gained a reputation for Meatball Mondays, where he serves the ground meat as a main course, the size of his beefy fist. Zaré molds the ground veal and beef mixture (\$25), liberally flecked with herbs and spices such as turmeric, preserved lime and garlic chives, around various meats, including a rack of lamb, so that the bones protrude from the top of the ball like the head of a dinosaur. In another rendition, the meatball conceals a quail stuffed with prunes, apricots and herbs, just waiting to be uncovered by a zealous fork. It's a portion big enough for two - or maybe three - and the flavors will live with you into the next day.

The lamb shank (\$24) is equally bold, served in a broth redolent of preserved limes, cinnamon, coriander and fenugreek, accompanied by puckery pickled vegetables; its girth is even bigger than the meatball. He's not one for small portions nor for subtlety. Zaré coats mahi mahi with a cumin spice blend (\$23); his lamb tongue appetizer (\$10) is braised in cinnamon broth and has an explosive flavor that overpowers any of the gamy nuances one might expect from organ meat. It's served with sweet apple chutney and slices of chestnuts.

Couscous salad (\$12/\$18), tossed in a lemon vinaigrette, is served on a chile-dusted plate, contributing to the bold flavors that obliterate the finer points of fresh crab. Pistachio meatballs (\$10) have a great beefy taste and texture, in pomegranate syrup that's both sweet and acidic enough to raise little blisters on the tongue; it's good, but the meatballs might as well be tofu, they were so overwhelmed by the sauce.

Spices fight for dominance

On dish after dish, the interesting spices fight for dominance, but when seasonings are held in check, the combinations can be ethereal, such as a smoked trout salad (\$11), served in a lopsided bowl that frames cucumber cut like linguine, dots of coral trout roe and dill creme fraiche. Bolder but still balanced flavors emerged in the grilled octopus and calamari (\$12), blended with borlotti beans, sturdy sprigs of frisee and lemon confit.

Tarragon was the overbearing element that nearly unbalanced the drunken chicken (\$19), but the texture of the meat, and the accompanying artichokes and mushrooms, were right on. The meat is poached in cream and infused with the herb, creating a rich, satisfying sauce; it's particularly good with the side of fries (\$5), flecked with herbs and served with a saffron aioli. They're thicker than most but are among the best in the city.

Then there's dessert: consultant Marisa Churchill is a good pastry chef, but her Not Your Grandmother's Pie (\$9) would be better named Marisa's Folly. It's a perfect example of why deconstructed desserts are becoming passe; it's a silly idea that doesn't go with anything else on the menu. The dessert consists of individual ingredients that don't gain anything by being together: a pile of graham cracker crumbs next to a blob of lemon curd, a mound of meringue and a little scoop of coconut lime sorbet lined up next to each other, with drizzles of saffron mint syrup.

The yogurt (\$9), drizzled with white truffle honey, is more in keeping with Zaré's savory courses, as is the goat cheese cheesecake (\$9) with dates and toasted walnuts, and the chocolate surprise (\$9), a chocolate torte with caramel ice cream and a chocolate cup that holds sesame peanut "Cracker Jacks."

Welcoming presence

For his return to the city, Zaré was able to lure Mario Nocifera, who has worked at many restaurants in the city, as general manager, and he is a welcoming presence at the door.

The staff is knowledgeable, and goes the extra mile. If you wear black pants, for example, they're quick to change the white napkin for a black one, and if you go to the restroom, you'll come back with a clean or nicely folded napkin. Filtered water comes in carafes, but it's almost a race to see who pours first.

And when things get a little backed up, Zaré will emerge from the kitchen to greet a few guests and to deliver a few dishes. He's a hands-on owner, and it's easy to see that he loves coming back to where his career began.

In a world of cookie-cutter concepts, Zaré offers something different; it may not be to everyone's taste, but the restaurant exudes passion.

The wine list

Looking for peace in the Middle East? Look no further than Chris Blanchard's wine list at Zaré at Fly Trap. The imaginative, well-conceived and exceptionally well-priced list is filled with wines many haven't heard of, with selections from France, Italy, the Mediterranean islands, Spain and the "Peace in the Middle East" category that pays homage to chef-owner Hoss Zaré's background.

Chateau Musar, a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cinsault and Carignane from Lebanon, comes in three vintages: 1991 (\$175), 1994 (\$92) and 1999 (\$76). This inspired selection is an example of the unusual and often affordable wines that pepper the list, whether it's the 2005 Garetto Barbera d'Asti at \$24 or the 2006 Radio Coteau "La Neblina" Pinot Noir for \$84. In most cases the markups are less than you'll pay at comparable restaurants.

In addition to the 75 bottle selections, Blanchard includes 10 half bottles and 17 by-the-glass offerings priced from \$8 to \$13. To finish, he has an equally interesting sweet wine selection, including the 1997 Poniatowski Clos de l'Avenir Vouvray Moelleux (\$14) or the 2003 Donnafugata Zibibbo "Ben Rye" Passito di Pantelleria from Sicily for \$14.

The restaurant also has a full bar with specialty cocktails (\$10) such as the Absinthe frappe with orgeat and lemon, and the Persian breakfast cocktail with grape vodka, bergamot honey, lemon and a froth of egg white (\$10).

If you bring your own wine, corkage is \$20.

- M.B.

Zaré at fly trap

606 Folsom St. (near Second Street), San Francisco; (415) 243-0580. Lunch, dinner 11:30 a.m. to midnight Monday-Friday; 6 p.m.-midnight Saturday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Street parking, moderately difficult.

Overall: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Food: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Service: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Atmosphere: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Prices: \$\$\$ (Expensive, \$18-\$24)

Noise rating: FOUR BELLS Can only talk in raised voices (75-80 decibels)

Ratings key

FOUR STARS = Extraordinary; THREE STARS = Excellent; TWO STARS = Good; ONE STAR = Fair; NO STARS = Poor

\$ = Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under; \$\$ = Moderate: \$11-\$17; \$\$\$ = Expensive: \$18-\$24; \$\$\$\$ = Very Expensive: more than \$25

ONE BELL = Pleasantly quiet (less than 65 decibels); TWO BELLS = Can talk easily (65-70); THREE BELLS = Talking normally gets difficult (70-75); FOUR BELLS = Can talk only in raised voices (75-80); BOMB = Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Prices are based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings. Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous. All meals are paid for by The Chronicle. Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits. Ratings are updated continually based on at least one revisit.

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