



Foreign Cinema - Restaurant Review

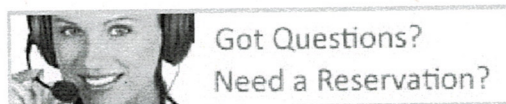


Foreign Cinema

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2534 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94110 ([Map](#))

Restaurant Review



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Foreign Flavors Under the Stars

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By [Jasmine Rios](#)

When Foreign Cinema opened in 1999, the building facade on Mission Street had no signage to indicate a restaurant existed inside. Strange perhaps, but that was the intent -- to create a chic underground image. The restaurant/cinema did considerably well during its first year, but eventually business started to decline and the future of the restaurant became uncertain.

In 2001, married couple Gayle Pirie and John Clark, formerly of Zuni Cafe and Chez Panisse, took over Foreign Cinema. Having traveled the world for some years working as restaurant consultants, they had the necessary expertise to turn Foreign Cinema around. The chef duo completely restructured internal operations from marketing to menu. That same year, the New York Times and the San Francisco Chronicle paid a visit and came through with rave reviews. Foreign Cinema has been running strong ever since.

My two guests and I arrived to the restaurant just before 8pm on a Sunday. We entered through the large metal swinging doors with circular windows which led us down a long hall. Half-way down on the right was the entrance to club Laszlo -- a full-service bar with rotating deejays offering the full Foreign Cinema restaurant menu. We continued down the hall and went through a second set of swinging metal doors. There before us was the coveted Foreign Cinema courtyard where Roman Polanski's "Chinatown" was about to begin. The setting was elegant with lighted candles and white table cloths. Opposite the courtyard entrance was the great wall -- a side of another building used for the film projections. When I saw the sound speakers, I couldn't help to be amused; they were actual drive-in movie speakers propped up on posts next to each table -- very original.

Adjacent to the courtyard was Modernism West art gallery, independent from the restaurant, but used often as dining space for private functions. Major corporate entities such as Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Pixar have held functions at the restaurant and art gallery. Celebrities

such as Madonna, Charlize Theron, Chelsea Clinton, and most recently, actor Neil Patrick Harris and band members of Green Day and Coldplay have also stopped by for a bite; on separate occasions of course.

For this visit, my guests and I decided to dine indoors under the brighter chandelier lighting. Lots of conversation was going on as we entered: a good sign that people were enjoying themselves. Inside this spacious oblong room to the right of the courtyard, was a cozy fireplace with candelabras on the mantle and more white table cloths and candles. The room had a semi-rustic feel from the natural wood floors with matching wood chairs. On the right, was a high concrete wall that added some urban industrial contrast. Upstairs was a semi-private mezzanine overlooking the dining room. The intimate space and one-sided brown leather booth seating that stretches completely across one wall makes this a very desirable section for couples and small parties.

We were seated on the main floor on the left by the windows facing the courtyard. From my seat, I had a clear view of the full bar in the back of the room which offered a variety of non-alcoholic beverages, a dozen imported beers and domestic micro-brews, and the makings for just about any concoction you could conjure up. Ten film themed specialty drinks were on the menu and I tried the "La Dolce Vita," which I was told was very popular. This amalgam was a cross between an Old Fashioned and a Whiskey Sour. The drink called for muddled oranges, brandied cherries, bitters, sweet and sour, and Elijah Craig bourbon over ice. A strong, semi-sweet man's man kind of drink and, although not one I would typically order, having tasted it I discovered a newfound appreciation for bourbon.

Foreign Cinema has earned the Wine Spectator Award of Excellence for its extensive variety of wines which exceeds 100 labels. By the glass, there are over two dozen wines ranging in price from \$7 - \$22. Serving sizes are also quite generous.

While looking over the menu, our attentive server Julia, brought us a complimentary bottle of Natura, Italian sparkling water, and some fresh sourdough bread. Shortly after, we were treated to an amuse-bouche. We each received separate plates with a single bite of fresh sweet watermelon with a splash of olive oil, a sprinkle of cocoa nibs and sea salt. Such an unusual combination, yet strangely wonderful. Our taste buds were astir now.

To accompany our upcoming appetizers, I selected the 2007 Honea Vineyard, Tocai Friulano from Santa Barbara. This versatile wine with notes of apple and lemon was a fine choice for what was to come.

We selected three types of raw oysters out of the ten choices on the menu. All three varieties were nicely arranged on a plate of ice with lemon. The BeauSoleil oysters from New Brunswick, a favorite among connoisseurs, were firm in texture, as they should be, sweet, and slightly salty. The Kumamoto oysters from Washington, originally from Japan, but now extinct in the wild due to pollution, are considered the sweetest among all oyster species: they're smooth, creamy, and wonderful. The Hog Island Sweets from Point Reyes are at the height of their peak season during the summer months. These sweets were fresh, light, and delicious.

Following the oysters, was the "Urban Picnic" course. Since the menu changes daily, all the dishes we selected were among the restaurants most commonly used main ingredients.

Being partial to cheese, the Baked Goat Cheese sounded intriguing. On a large fig leaf, a dollop of creamy, warm goat cheese was served with slices of walnut toast and olive tapenade. It was an enjoyable savory dish that could be made even better by the addition of some fresh fruit for refreshing contrast.

Next we tried the Smoked Trout and Goat Cheese Panini; which was quite possibly the best panini I ever tasted. The lightly toasted bread oozed with intense flavor from the tartness of the chèvre and smokiness of the trout. It was divine.

My "Feature" course, was the Fideus. Simmered in fresh tomatoes, clams, and saffron, a small cod and halibut fillet lay stacked on a bed of toasted capellini. The cod was light and flaky and the halibut firm yet delicate. The flavors married well, but a touch more saffron for

flavor and broth for added moisture would have helped.

To accompany the halibut, a manager recommended the 2006 Domaine Bott Geyl, Muscat/Riesling/Sylvaner blend from Alsace. I anticipated the Muscat to be more dominant, but the Sylvaner tamed the sweetness and added more acidic balance. With its floral aromas, fruity flavors and slightly dry characteristics, it reminded me of a Viognier and proved appropriate as an apéritif or accompaniment with some savory and sweet dishes.

The Grilled Lamb Sirloin Brochette with couscous and seared ginger raita was superb. Per our servers recommendation, the lamb was prepared medium rare. Everything on the plate was cooked expertly. The lamb and baby artichokes were tender and abundant with flavor from the raita beneath and the couscous on the side was moist and incredibly flavorful from the surrounding juices. I would order this again.

The Four Peppercorn Duck Breast, prepared medium rare, as recommended by our server, was thinly sliced into layers and accompanied by naturally sweetened roasted cherries. The duck was tender with crispy skin along the edges and nicely seasoned. Nestled to the side were some al dente baby turnips sautéed with escarole. It was truly wonderful.

From the dessert menu, we tried the Lemon Verbena Crème Brûlée: a crisp, golden, very delicate top layer of crystallized sugar with a creamy custard sweetened just right with a mild taste of lemon. Resting beside the Crème Brûlée was a lovely lemon zest confit -- a très magnifique ensemble.

With Foreign Cinema's ever-changing menu and film line-up, you'll encounter something new every time. The only constant you'll find is great service. Next time, I'll be sure to sit outside to take in the complete Foreign Cinema experience under the stars.

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