

San Francisco Chronicle



STAR CHEFS GO SIMPLE ROUTE



Many plan to open inexpensive spin-offs of their restaurants

The stars of some of San Francisco's most popular restaurants will be spinning off a galaxy of simple, casual, inexpensive offshoots this spring. Chefs, it seems, just want to have fun.

Craig Stoll of Delfina will open a 22-seat New York-meets-Naples pizza place. In his wildest dreams, he'd have "hotties on Vespas" delivering pizzas all over town.

Slanted Door's Charles Phan plans a kiosk selling hot bowls of pho and take-home clay pot chicken kits outside his new Ferry Building flagship, and later a Vietnamese street food emporium in his original Valencia Street spot.

Traci Des Jardins of Jardiniere and Acme Chophouse is opening a taqueria, and Gerald Hirigoyen of Piperade is revving up a Spanish-Basque sandwiches and tapas place. Luke Sung of Isa, Hubert Keller of Fleur de Lys and Paul Bertolli of Oakland's Oliveto are also starting up sidelights. The spin-offs feed the same appetites that have driven the small-plates phenomenon: Diners want more flavors per meal, but they don't necessarily want to eat a lot or spend too much. The new offshoots take the trend one step further toward quick and simple.

"We all wanted to go to a place where you don't need a reservation, where it's not too serious," said Sung. "We just wanted to go eat and drink and have simple food." Besides the obvious desire to make money, for some of the chefs, it's about doing "something I've always wanted to do." Des Jardins, for example, is half Mexican and has always known she would open a place serving what she calls "my soul food." She is close to nailing down a place in the Ferry Building and hopes to open in May or June.

Spin-offs also provide new outlets for chefs' creativity. At his Burger Bar in Las Vegas, Keller brings the same inventiveness to the humble burger that he does to his elegant French cuisine at Fleur de Lys. He serves burgers topped with truffles and foie gras, and even offers dessert burgers fashioned from a holeless doughnut bun with a chocolate patty.

For many of the chefs, fast-but-good suits the way they like to eat now that they have kids.

Most of all, "simple" offers liberation from customers' fine-dining expectations -- flowers, valet parking and dishes so popular that they can never be taken off the menu.

Simplicity is what Alice Waters craved when she started her Chez Panisse offshoot, Cafe Fanny, 20 years ago.

"I wanted to be in the kitchen again. I imagined myself in a foolish way standing behind the counter, pouring glasses of wine. I thought that it was going to be easy," she said.

Twenty years have taught her that when you've got a reputation for quality, "it's not simple."

Still, that's the dream of the new wave of chefs popping out spin-offs over the next couple of months.

Hirigoyen is one of several who long to recreate the eating experiences they love in the tapas places of Spain, or the pizzerias of Naples -- places where people can just drop in, hang out, meet friends, bring the baby and eat as much or as little as they like. His Bocadillos, set to open in April in the Financial District, fills the bill.

"If you go to Spain, you go in, it's very casual, but you have a great meal," Hirigoyen said. "What you want is a great bite in a jiffy, and you get it."

In Phan's native Vietnam, when people didn't want to go to a fancy restaurant, they ate from street stalls. "They call it a small eat," and that's the kind of food he wants to replicate with his quick-serve kiosk, which should open outside his new Slanted Door in the Ferry Building in May. The noodle house is months away.

"Now that I have three little kids at home, I don't go to restaurants. Either I go to a restaurant and get to-go food or I cook myself," he said. With the do-it-yourself kits of some of his popular dishes, "the idea is you can whip dinner up in a few minutes."

The clay pot chicken, for instance, will come with marinated chicken in the pot, plus all the fixings, cut, measured and ready to go. Commuters can grab a kit, hop on the ferry and cook dinner in a few minutes when they get home.

These chefs are also looking to strike a spark. Sung says dining out in the United States is almost an occasion, and can get heavy, even "boring. Everyone has fingerling potatoes. Everybody is serving some kind of steak, chicken, sea bass, salmon, halibut..."

At Isa, he knows he can't change one detail of his potato-wrapped sea bass or other signature dishes, or customers would be disappointed.

At Lux, the pan-Asian small-plates place he is opening three doors from Isa in the Marina, "I am going to try to have some fun," he said. He hopes to open later this month or early in April.

Isa remains Sung's baby, as with the other chefs and their signature restaurants. The spin-offs are a little something on the side.

"Delfina is a labor of love," said Stoll, who opened it with his wife, Anne, in 1998 as a simple place that blossomed into a destination. "I don't want open another Delfina. I just couldn't do it."

Their hole-in-the-wall pizzeria will offer carafes of California Sangiovese and four or five "pretty straightforward pizzas." With expenses low, the pizzeria could turn a neat profit.

The pizzeria would be a longtime fantasy made real. So will Des Jardins' taqueria. If the Ferry Building location doesn't pan out, she says she'll find another one.

"Mexican food is what I grew up with," said Des Jardins, whose mother's parents came from Mexico. "I cook it at home a lot."

She wants to change people's notions about Mexican cooking - both the public's idea that it's all about burritos the size of your head and the culinary world's tendency to underrate it.

And, she likes the idea of a place that's more affordable than Jardiniere and Acme, while offering high-quality sustainable ingredients.

Simplicity is the dream -- but it's also hard to keep things simple, as Waters learned at Cafe Fanny and Stoll suspects as he plans his pizzeria.

"That's my big fear about the little place," he said. "It's in our nature to keep tweaking things and getting more intense."

But customers can do their part to save chefs like him from themselves, he says.

"It's just dinner. guvs. Lighten up."