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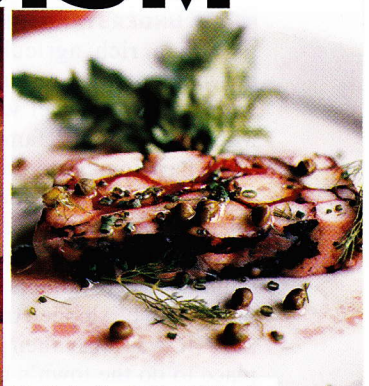
# Gourmet

THE MAGAZINE OF GOOD LIVING

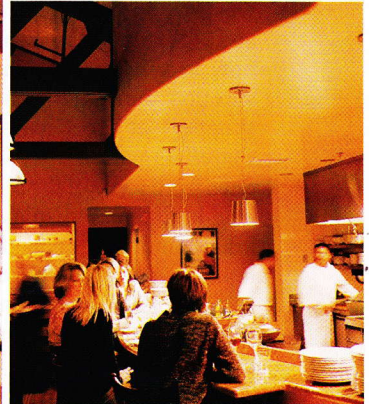


# REVIEWS & CRITICISM

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## CALIFORNIA



## HALF MOON ON THE RISE

JUST SOUTH OF SAN FRANCISCO, THE COZY GLOW AND EARTHY MEDITERRANEAN FOOD OF CETRELLA IS A BEACON IN THE COOL, MISTY NIGHT **BY CAROLINE BATES**

**S**ELDOM OUT OF SIGHT of the sea, Highway 1 meanders south from San Francisco along what travel writers once called the Unknown Coast. And it was true that anyone looking for a warm beach and a hot nightlife never gave it a glance, pressing south to sunnier shores. But if you preferred your seacoasts uncrowded and in shades of gray, if you were partial to old fishing and farming towns where people still spoke Portuguese

and Italian, if you'd ever dropped in at Duarte's, in Pescadero, for a bowl of artichoke soup, you were happy to keep the Bay Area's little secret to yourself.

But there are no unknown coasts left in California. The suburbs creep closer to Half Moon Bay, and new housing tracts push against plowed fields. On the ocean bluffs, aloof from town, ritzy mansions rise around a golf course and a new Ritz-Carlton, where valet

parkers in 1930s caps and knickers could be on a casting call for *The Legend of Bagger Vance*. And on Main Street, past the charming San Benito House and the shops in turn-of-the-century cottages, you run into the Mediterranean mirage of **Cetrella**, its ochre stucco

exterior gleaming through the mist. Ever since the opening of the restaurant, two years ago, traffic to the coast has been brisker than it used to be.

**Whether you relax at a table by the fire or take a seat at the bar, you'll be won over by Cetrella's way with local produce, from octopus terrine to a black Mission fig tart.**

**I**T'S UNDERSTANDABLE why an area with a rich agricultural heritage would attract a restaurateur smitten with Italy and a chef who grew up in Michigan on his family's working farm. Part homage to Capri and to Half Moon Bay, his home for 16 years, Paul Shenkman's Cetrella occupies the site of the historic Growers Association building, where farmers trucked in their produce to be shipped on to urban markets. It was also their social club, a place to do the town's business and to play a game of cards after the harvest was in. On Saturdays between April and November, the farmers still come, now to sell their artichokes, Brussels sprouts, and fava beans directly to shoppers at the Coastsides Market in Cetrella's parking lot. To see the produce from some of the most fertile farmland in the West displayed beside wild king salmon, artisanal goat cheeses and honeys, and home-baked cheesecakes and pies is to understand the essential roles farming and fishing still play in the life and economy of the region.

Inside, the building's original roof beams now trace an overhead fretwork under a ridge of skylights. Oriental rugs are strewn on cherrywood floors, fires blaze in double stone fireplaces, and splashy bouquets from the local flower nurseries bloom on counters and tabletops. The restaurant is immense, housing a bar-café-jazz venue, a temperature-controlled cheese cave, and a 40-foot exhibition kitchen, yet the dining rooms are so cleverly con-

It was a place for the farmers to do the town's business and to play a game of cards after the harvest was in.

figured that some tables seem like islands of intimacy. Seated cozily by a fire one chilly night, nibbling on olives and eating a pumpkin and porcini soup that tasted of the sun and the earth, I half believed that Cetrella was the bistro it is somewhat disingenuously called. And the soup was so illuminating I began to think that however repetitive and tired the rustic Mediterranean theme, a Coastsides variation played by the right chef offered opportunities for fresh insights.

Executive chef Erik Cosselmon knows the score well: For three years he held the same post at San Francisco's Rose

Pistola, cooking seafood with a Ligurian flavor. His solid résumé also includes significant time at Le Bernardin, Daniel, and 44 at the Royalton in New York City, as well as stages abroad in the south of France. Lured from the city partly by the prospect of being closer to the farmers, he deeply respects the coastal bounty ("The best shelling peas I've ever eaten," he says), understands exactly how to cook it, and then gets out of the way. In autumn, when Half Moon Bay is a field-to-field carpet of pumpkins, delicate pumpkin ravioli turned up on the menu, as well as roasted Cinderella pumpkin, its sweet earthiness needing nothing at all, though a sage brown butter was very nice. Never a fan of Brussels sprouts (who knew that the coast is the world's capital for the shrimp of the cabbage family?), I surprised myself by devouring Cetrella's, roasted in a wood oven with smoked bacon, wondering why I never appreciated their nutty character. Long after two of us tried to do justice to a 32-ounce

Harris Ranch rib-eye steak, I remembered the bite of the braised chicory with it, and the *pommes frites* that stayed crisp even after they had cooled. A lemony *crema catalana* aside, the best desserts celebrate local fruits—a quince tart and a "summer pudding" of blueberry- and strawberry-drenched brioche elegant enough to grace an English tea. In Coastsides Mediterranean cooking, produce is paramount.

The fruits of the sea are no less important, even though these days, due to closures of once productive fishing grounds, some seafood must be flown in from other waters. Still, the kitchen



CALIFORNIA

Cetrella's zarzuela of clams, mussels, shrimp, and Dungeness crab in a tomato saffron broth is comfort and elegance in a single bowl.

roasts the local Dungeness crab and herring; pickles sardines; stuffs grilled calamari with chorizo; and smokes albacore, swordfish, and salmon, sending out the last in silky curls with waves of marinated cucumber. Everyone falls hard for the fritto misto from the land and the sea. It may include oysters, anchovies, or squid, or wild mushrooms and Romano beans. Frequently you bite into fat green olives under the light, crunchy coating, and always into Giusti Farms artichokes—the locals insist on them.

I've never found a fritto misto half as good in San Francisco, nor have I encountered the equal of Cosselmon's zarzuela. Starring clams, mussels, shrimp, and cracked Dungeness crab, this Catalan-style seafood stew is more complex and subtler than cioppino, with chopped almonds in its smoky tomato and saffron broth. As Cetrella eloquently proves, there is something new under the Mediterranean sun, even if you must drive to a foggy coast to find it.

**CETRELLA BISTRO & CAFÉ**

845 Main Street  
Half Moon Bay  
650-726-4090

Dinner daily; Sunday brunch.  
Main courses: \$18 to \$26.