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[Cyrus joins the four-star elite](#)

- [Michael Bauer](#)

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If you want to find the next superstar chef, look no further than Douglas Keane, who is proving his mettle each night at Cyrus in Healdsburg. Since it opened in March 2005 the restaurant has become the premier destination in Sonoma County, with a cachet that may someday rival the French Laundry.

When I reviewed the restaurant a few months after it opened, it was evident that Keane was cooking at a level that put him in an elite pantheon of chefs. A return visit last week to try the Chef's Tasting menu made it clear that although he's still young -- just 35 -- he's no longer a chef to watch but rather one to emulate.

When you add the other elements that make up the dining experience -- impeccable service coordinated by co-owner Nick Peyton, and refined, comfortable ambience -- it's clear that Cyrus has become a four-star destination.

The couple next to us, newlyweds from Washington, D.C., had tried without success to get into French Laundry. They ended up at Cyrus, and from the moment they were served the first appetizer, they were mesmerized.

As they worked their way through a magical meal that included silken creamy mussel soup with a side of olive oil potato puree and tempura mussels; a turchon of foie gras with peanut butter and jelly; and white pumpkin spaghetti with sugar pie coulis and shavings of truffles, Cyrus was creating a taste memory that would last a lifetime.

While Cyrus may have been their second choice, it doesn't need to play second fiddle to anyone. It's a totally different experience than the French Laundry, but it deserves to exist in the same star-studded stratosphere.

The savory selections are divided into eight categories: soups; vegetables; foie gras; pasta and risotto; fish and shellfish; poultry; meat; and dessert. Diners construct a three-, four- or five-course menu (\$58, \$69 or \$80) by choosing whatever they like. If they want three foie gras courses, it's no problem.

In fact, the staff goes out of its way so that diners have the meal they want. When the waiter describes a dish, for example, he will say, "The chef prepares it medium rare, unless you'd like it otherwise." And, whichever menu you choose, Keane will send out a few extra dishes along the way. For what diners get, Cyrus is a bargain.

For the seven-course tasting menu (\$95; wine pairings, additional \$75), the chef cooks whatever inspires him at the moment. He orchestrates the tasting menu like a symphony, building flavors to a dramatic crescendo.

The culinary music starts quietly, as diners sit down and are brought little bites such as a tart filled with confit of tomatoes, and a little wonton wrapper filled with creamy eggplant. That might be followed by a spoonful of a puree of golden beets from Keane's garden, a wedge of pickled beets, house-cured salmon and fresh wasabi and horseradish. Who would have thought that such a small bite could have such a nuclear effect on the palate?

It's de rigueur these days to start a menu with raw fish, but comparisons to other preparations stop there. Keane quickly sears two oval medallions of bluefin tuna and sets them on shaved lemon cucumbers and microgreens; the waiters pour on a clear broth of cucumber, lemon verbena and tomato water. The chef also crusts hamachi in white and black sesame seeds, sears it quickly and serves it with pressed spinach tossed with sesame and miso and a chilled consomme of fish broth, shoyu, shiso and konbu (seaweed). It's then topped with peppery wasabi strips and pickled mushrooms.

Keane's dishes build in intensity as the menu progresses, and he's adept at weaving together influences from many cultures in ways that that seem both logical and natural.

Asian influences show up in dishes such as Thai marinated lobster molded with avocado, melon and truffle-like shavings of hearts of palm; and in the meticulously crafted squab lacquered with house-made hoisin sauce, accented with local persimmons and set on a black bean rice cake.

Keane also has Thomas Keller's gift for presenting familiar, down-home flavors in a new light. He sears red snapper and gives it a Southern treatment by placing it atop black-eyed peas, andouille sausage, crayfish glaze, whole peeled tails and fried okra that lends both a crunch and a soothing viscous texture.

He's also created his own stylized BLT, an artful composition of bourbon-glazed pork belly on a bed of creamy braised iceberg lettuce and a slice of heirloom tomato, all topped off with a panko-crusting fried green tomato slice and a drizzle of bourbon and tomato glaze. It's a fun and brilliant combination, leaving you wanting even more. Then the next dish comes, and you end up thinking the same thing.

Even the "simple" items have layers of complexity. Keane puts a milky Parmesan broth in one compartment of a figure eight-shaped dish, and a rich truffled red wine risotto in the other.

The flavors and textures offset one another beautifully, especially matched with the right wine. Sommelier Jim Rollston's pick of the 2001 Cantina del Pino "Ovello" Barbaresco, for example, makes both elements come alive. Looking around the room, it seems most people allow Rollston to select the wines. It's a good thing, because the matches are both innovative and sublime.

Keane is a master at sauces that have unusual, subtle ingredients. For example, the Wagyu beef with foie gras is paired with rosti potatoes, chanterelles and a vin santo-verjus sauce. In the hands of an amateur this could have been a disaster, but Keane and his crew know how

to massage the seemingly disparate notes.

Pastry chef Annie Clemmons does her part by producing innovative, stylized desserts such as a roasted quince burnt flour cake, and a chocolate rum mousse that's piped inside a question mark-shaped flourless cake accented with bananas Foster and macadamia strudel. That's followed by a tray of little cakes and candies. As diners prepare to leave, a waiter brings out golden bags with house-made marshmallows and several wrapped candies to take home.

Cyrus also hits the right notes in the luxurious room. Glazed cloister ceilings and pearlized Venetian plaster walls make diners feel like they're luxuriating in the middle of an oyster. Beautifully set tables and a Champagne, caviar and cheese cart add further indulgent elements. Yet, the experience stops short of pretension.

A cadre of black-suited waiters with white shirts and brick-colored patterned ties circulate around the room like ballet dancers. When it's time to bring the food, each one brings a dish, sets it before the diners in unison and then describes the dish from a perfectly written script. However, when they veer from the script and answer a question, it's obvious that they've been well trained.

It all adds up to a seamless experience. Cyrus deserves four stars now, but Keane is continuing to build his skills. I think he's going to get even better.

*Michael Bauer is The Chronicle's restaurant critic, and executive food and wine editor. You can e-mail him at mbauer@sfnchronicle.com, and read his *Between Meals* blog on SFGate.com.*

Cyrus

29 North St. (at Healdsburg Ave.), Healdsburg; (707) 433-3311.
Dinner 5:30-9:30 p.m. nightly. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Easy street parking.

Overall:	FOUR STARS
Food:	FOUR STARS
Service:	FOUR STARS
Atmosphere:	FOUR STARS
Prices:	\$\$\$\$
Noise Rating:	THREE BELLS

RATINGS KEY

FOUR STARS:	Extraordinary
THREE STARS:	Excellent
TWO STARS:	Good
ONE STAR:	Fair
(box):	Poor

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

Prices based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings.

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

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Ratings are updated continually based on a least one revisit.

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