

20 courses. 4 dining rooms. A secret dessert closet? This Wine Country restaurant is like nowhere else

Soleil Ho

Nov. 10, 2022



1of6

Chef de partie Kyle Evans prepares crudités in the kitchen at Cyrus in Geyserville.

Brian L. Frank/Special to The Chronicle



When I first heard about Douglas Keane's years-long quest to revive Cyrus, the fine dining restaurant formerly in Healdsburg, I was so struck by the details. It felt like an overwhelming collection of ideas: A Champagne cart? Twenty courses in four dining areas? A secret dessert room with a chocolate fountain?

I did not have the pleasure of dining at the original Cyrus, which closed in 2012 with two Michelin stars, so I'll be honest — when I booked my reservations, I struggled to wrap my head around what I was in for. But what I found at the new restaurant was a highly effective refresh of fine dining conventions that made so much sense for the flighty, pandemic-frustrated and experience-driven moment we're in now.

During the three-hour meals I had here, I (along with the 11 others who made up my seating cohort) ate, moved, ate, moved and ate like a wandering herd of wildebeests. The rooms were a sedate procession of muted teal, gray and black palettes: as if the Bat Cave had food service.

In the first room, we were treated to cocktails and a long plate of small canapés fashioned after the five tastes, which I read as a promise by the chefs that they'd keep all five in mind throughout the meal. Each of the single-bite morsels hit the bull's-eye on its assigned flavor, from the mouthwatering umami of the tomato jam cradled in a miniature Parmesan tart crust to the pleasant bitter murmur of a charred amethyst radish served on a dab of matcha butter.



The first plate diners at Cyrus get is a tray of canapés.

Justin Katigbak/Special to The Chronicle

And with that, we were off to the next phase: the kitchen table. Keane himself presents these seven courses at an angular, U-shaped counter, and there's an alluring cinematic quality to this stage of the meal.

Some of the restaurant's most notable dishes are served here, like Keane's billi bi, a French fennel-forward mussel soup that tastes like you're being smashed with a foamy wave while standing on seaweed-covered rocks. Keane also flexes the flavors that he picked up while cooking at Kyoto's Japanese Culinary Academy: spicy, woodsy grilled matsutake with a sprig of chrysanthemum; Kusshi oysters basted with soy sauce-infused butter and cooked over charcoal on a Japanese charcoal grill; panna cotta-like silken tofu topped with juicy pieces of tangerine.

But my eyes kept being drawn away from the food because the design of the room was so compelling. In the best seats, you get a full-length view of the long, rectangular kitchen and all the staff picking herbs, mixing cocktails and delicately scattering finger lime pulp on your halibut.

Even in a trendy restaurant with an open kitchen, you don't often get a multi-plane view of the action. At Cyrus, the staging comes off like theater, with diners sitting in the darkened end of the room eating snacks, their eyes naturally trained on the well-lit and polished kitchen.



After a bite in the lounge, diners head to the Cyrus kitchen for the next seven courses.

Brian L. Frank/Special to The Chronicle

Diners are invited to get up and walk through the room, to peer over the chefs' shoulders and say hi, similar to San Francisco's Lazy Bear. You can even poke your head into the separate pastry and prep kitchen, a highly organized space that would make Marie Kondo weep. The servers, led by maître'd Nick Peyton, patiently fold napkins and push in seats as people float around, though I imagine reining in the diners can be like herding cats once the wine really starts flowing.

Then you're whisked off to the main dining room, allowed to gaze upon verdant rows of grapevines as the servers bring you seven more dishes.

A seared sea scallop is placed off-center on a rectangular plate, with braised lettuce trailing behind like the tail of a comet. Perched on top is an eyebrow-raising provocation: a crisp, seared morsel of foie gras, buttery with a whisper of

tallow flavor. (It's legal for individuals to buy foie gras from out-of-state producers, but things get iffy when restaurants get involved.) It would be nice to also receive a shroud to drape over your head as you eat this one, as the French do with ortolan, another famously illegal bit of poultry.



Beef with squash and matsutake is a stand-out course at Cyrus in Geyserville.

Justin Katigbak/Special to The Chronicle

The beef course, a ruby slab of lightly seared and buttery Akaushi beef from Texas, sits in a pool of beef consomme. You get a fluttery burst of sourness from the liquid — the sweet-sour essence of umeshu, a liquor infused with ume plums. By the time you get to this 12th course, you might be thinking about the long drive home, but the pho-like complexity of the umeshu consomme will slap you on the cheek.

I could also go on about the wonderful desserts by pastry chef Josh Gaulin, formerly of the Restaurant at Meadowood: the caramelly tonka bean dessert topped with a slab of poached Pink Lady apple flesh that dramatically unwinds like a spool of satiny ribbon, and the bracing, perfume-like sorbet of Buddha's hand citrus and chamomile.



Tonka bean dessert at Cyrus. Pastry chef Josh Gaulin used to work at the three-Michelin-starred Restaurant at Meadowood.

Justin Katigbak/Special to The Chronicle

As the tables around you finish dessert, parties are individually escorted to a hidden room that seems like a refurbished supply closet. The chocolate waterfall awaits. You're greeted by the very on-the-nose and slightly embarrassing sound of "Pure Imagination," the song sung by Gene Wilder's Willy Wonka as he escorts a crowd of snot-nosed kids to his candy sanctum. There's so much going on in here: the scent of melted chocolate, the Cyrus logo projected in light onto that chocolate, truffles in a box presented on a hovering platform held up by lasers. You have to quash the impulse to dunk your head in the waterfall; the server who escorts you might be all smiles, but I assume they're trained to use force if necessary to keep you from making a very expensive mistake.

Even though Cyrus has been in development for years, its concept works so well for 2022. What's refreshing is that Keane acknowledged an inherent problem in fine dining that makes it as unapproachable-seeming as endeavors like opera, theater and ballet: events where the audience is expected to sit still and be silent, absorbing culture as it happens rather than being able to actively participate in it. You might find some token gestures at interactivity at other high-end

restaurants, but the tour of the kitchen usually is the treat you get at the end, after you've been a good audience member and finished your dessert.



Guests are not supposed to touch the chocolate wall at Cyrus.

Brian L. Frank/Special to The Chronicle

This kind of progressive dinner feels better for your brain, too. It takes advantage of what cognitive scientists call the doorway effect: when your short-term memory is lightly reset as you enter a new room. (Like when you head to the bathroom to grab something and completely forget what you wanted when you get there.) It forces you to see the next phase as something new, keeping you from the feelings of idleness and stagnation that can happen when you're sitting in one place for a long time.

Food Guide

Top 25 Restaurants

Where to eat in the Bay Area. Find spots near you, create a dining wishlist, and more.

With the way it seemingly borrows from cinema, new wave restaurants like Lazy Bear and immersive theatrical experiences like New York's Sleep No More, Cyrus makes fine dining engaging and actually fun, and I hope other Michelin star-seeking restaurants take note.

Cyrus

275 Highway 128, Geyserville. 707-723-5999 or www.cyrusrestaurant.com

Hours: 5:30-9 p.m. Thursday-Monday.

Accessibility: All on one level. Gender-neutral restrooms.

Noise level: Low to moderate.

Meal for two, without drinks: \$590.

Meat-free options: Vegetarian menu available on request.

Drinks: Full bar. \$250 wine pairing by wine director Cyrus Schultz.

Transportation: Private parking lot.

Best practices: If you're not into the full monty, the lounge is open for walk-ins, with cocktails and small bites, from 6:30-9 p.m. Thursday-Monday. Reservations for the tasting menu are released on the first of every month at 11 a.m.