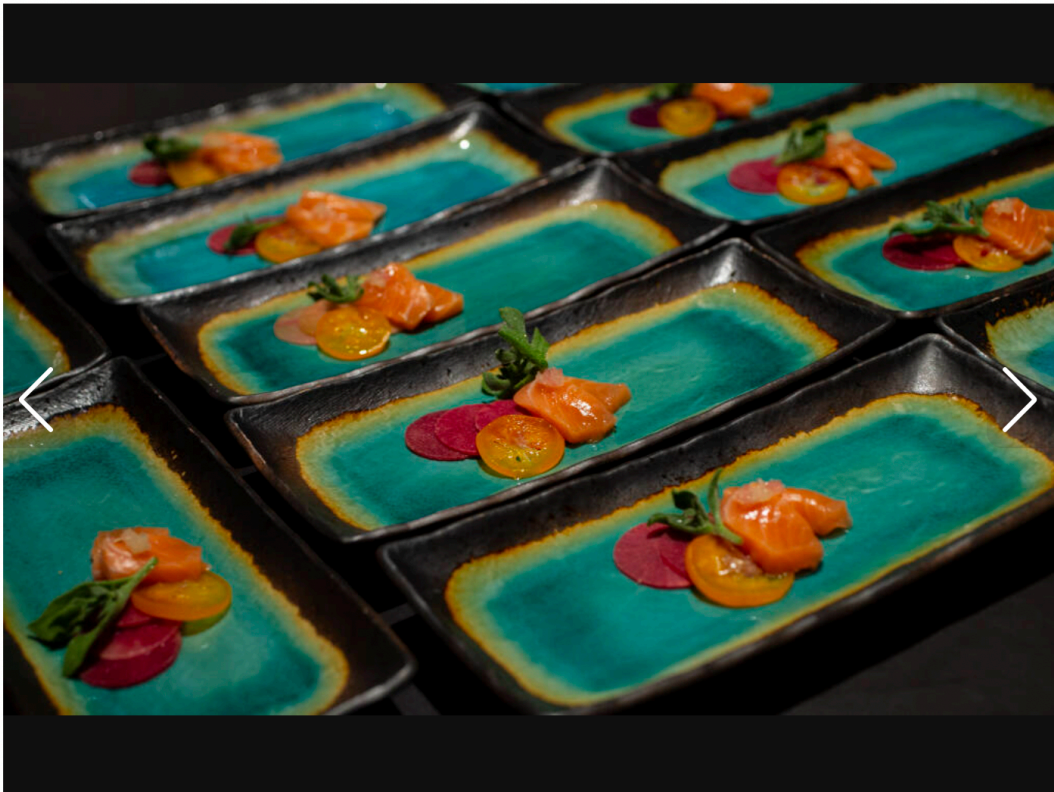


A homecoming for Cyrus

Douglas Keane and his crew are back, and it feels like we're home again. | 📄 7



SLIDE 2 OF 11

Salmon, kumquat, finger lime and shio koji are plated for service at Cyrus in Geyserville during a family and friends pre-opening night on Sept. 8, 2022. (Chad Surmick / The Press Democrat)

CAREY SWEET

FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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The memories are so vivid: I was swooning over a cup of Billi Bi at Cyrus, as chef-owner Douglas Keane stepped out of the kitchen to explain the origins of the luxurious mussel soup. I'd already said hello to Chef Drew Glassell and Nick Peyton, the maitre d'hotel, and was looking forward to an evening of spectacular food at the two Michelin-starred restaurant.

That was more than a decade ago, when Cyrus was still in Healdsburg, before it closed after a dispute with its Les Mars Hotel landlords. Yet here I was again, in late 2022, spooning up the same, velvety Billi Bi, with the same remarkable team. It gave me a feeling of *deja vu*, and joy, that our fancy, fantastic corner of the Wine Country culinary world felt whole again.

Cyrus

Where: 275 Highway 128, Geyserville

When: 5:30 to 9 p.m. Thursday-Monday

Contact: 707-723-5999,
cyrusrestaurant.com

Cuisine: California, Asian, global

Price: Very expensive, prix fixe \$295

Summary: Celebrity chef Douglas Keane and his crew are back, and it feels like we're home again. It's an expensive, extravagant home, but delightful indeed.

Cyrus is back. As anyone who follows food knows, it's in Geyserville now in the former Sunsweet prune packing plant that has been transformed into a contemporary glass, stone, steel and wood palace. Dare I say, it's even more spectacular than before, with a 20-course tasting menu of seasonal California fare accented by Japanese and other global influences.

Yet because this a project from Keane, Peyton and Glassell, as fancy and precise as the cuisine is, it's also a relaxed experience. It feels like we're dining with friends.

In a sense, we are. New friends, at least, as the restaurant limits dinners to 36 guests per night, divided into groups of 12 for the partly communal experience.

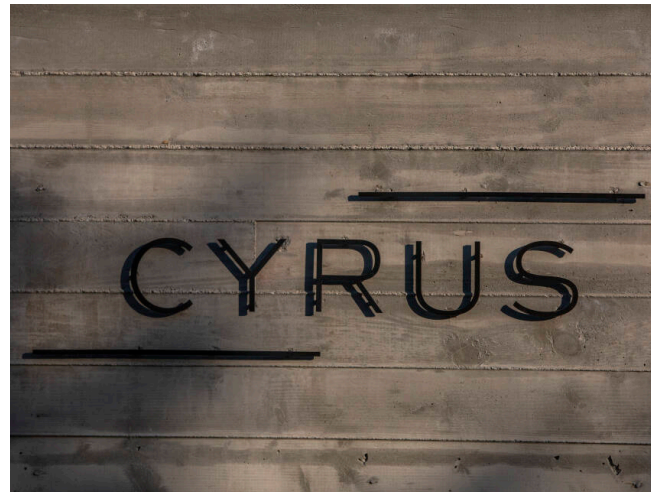
A captain is assigned to each seating, guiding our party through a progressive Champagne and canapes "Bubble Lounge" reception, hors d'oeuvres at an interactive chef's table in the kitchen, entrees at private tables in the dining room overlooking Alexander Valley vineyards and dessert in the Chocolate Room.

Keane describes it as a "dining journey," a departure from "luxury restaurants that were stupefying diners with extended multicourse meals running for hours at the same table, in the same room."

At \$295 per person, with wine pairings an additional \$250 and a mandatory 20% service charge, this is definitely a special-occasion immersion. Be prepared to spend even more: all Bubble Lounge drinks cost extra, the wine pairings are modest 2-ounce pours in each dining area and other wines by the glass or bottle are sold a la carte.

Yet in the scheme of dining out in these expensive days, I still think Cyrus is a good value. As one perfect plate after another is paraded out, I'm fascinated by every morsel. At the end of the evening, I'm thrilled with the beautiful flavors and even a bit stuffed with the good portion sizes.

The menu showcases the five essential flavors: sweet, sour, salty, bitter and umami. So, at the Bubble Lounge, bites are lined up with sweet, firm figs crusted with grated chorizo, followed by a lovely lobster tail nubbin with a sour dressing of herbs and Thai fish sauce. A salty taste arrives as a warm gougère filled with liquid Comté Bleu fondue, while bitter brings charred French radishes for dunking in matcha-tea butter dusted in sea salt.



“For umami,” our server explains, “We take late-season ripe tomatoes, cook them down to their very essence and then serve them in a little Parmesan tart, savory and slightly sour.” (I’m pretty sure he said that — it can be hard to hear the descriptions over the shake-shake-shake of martinis being made at the glittering ice-laden bar cart steps away.)

Kitchen table

The highlight of the night, for me, is the next experience. In the restaurant’s expansive kitchen, our 12-person party is seated at a U-shaped counter right next to the chefs’ workstations.

Here, chefs perform their ballet in the gleaming stainless-steel space next to us. Then Keane appears, to guide us through more marvelous bites. He explains exotic ingredients in his casual way and clearly still loves the magic of food even after winning the James Beard Award for Best Chef Pacific and appearing on “Top Chef” and “Hell’s Kitchen” as a judge and on “Top Chef Masters” as a winning contestant.

“This is interactive, and there are no rules. It’s mostly finger food here.” He invites us, too, to shout out questions and wander the kitchen to see the work for ourselves.

Keane brings us each a black pottery tray adorned with exquisite vegetables, the plates shimmering beneath spotlight beams that radiate from tubular steel pendants above our heads.

There’s a ramekin of umeboshi dip made with preserved plum with a touch of Kewpie mayonnaise, bonito flakes and yuzu juice.

“Really, the significance ... is that this place used to be a plum packing plant,” he says, to the delight of the diners.

There are baby carrots done sunomono style, blanched slightly with shio koji marinade for a sweet, slightly funky note. There are oyster leaves from the borage family, miniature baby squash, pickled baby golden beets, sea beans, compressed lemon cucumbers, cherry tomatoes from former French Laundry gardener Tucker Taylor, cucamelon (grape-size fruits that look like Lilliputian watermelons) and mystifying gnarly gray-green knobs with purple blossoms that turn out to be Malabar spinach buds.

There's so much more, such as a dainty cup of gazpacho consomme poured over micro basil leaves and a single, glittering Kushi oyster on ice with a dollop of transparent ginger shiso dashi gelee. Two delicate squares of raw shima aji (horse mackerel) sit atop compressed watermelon radishes and thin sliced Fukushu kumquat with sorrel, finger lime, lemony ice lettuce and shio koji.



Finally, the Billi Bi is laid down, and Keane entralls us with its description.

“There's a restaurant in Paris called Maxim's, and the chef was famous for his mussel soup,” he says. “Yet this tycoon gentleman in the late 19th century, William B. Leeds from Texas, would fly over there and then he would ask the chef to strain the mussels out because he hated their texture. They had this love-hate relationship, but eventually the guy came so many times, and other people loved the soup, so the chef put it on the menu.”

The result is indeed as stunning as I remembered. Mussels are slow-cooked in white wine until their liquor is extracted, then the seafood is removed with a fine strainer. Leeks, fennel, thyme and parsley are sweated in butter, then simmered with white wine, the mussel liquor, heavy cream and saffron. A sprinkle of fennel pollen, and voila — so elegant yet simple.

The main event

By the time we're escorted to the dining room, I'm giddy. It's minimalist in here, with sleek black tables, no art on the walls and only dark Alexander Valley vineyard views through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The building sits 10 feet above the valley floor, creating the illusion of floating above the landscape.

Maitre d'hotel Peyton glides up with a gift from the kitchen: a silky oval of Hudson Valley foie gras arranged over compressed peach slices and drizzled in peach syrup. It's already over-the-top rich, but it comes with warm steamed buns and a crock of butter churned with salty-sweet Saikyo white miso.

The fantastical journey continues, with risotto cooked creamy with red wine, with abundant butter and white Alba truffle and a crown of Parmesan foam. Pan-seared duck breast from Petaluma's Liberty Duck is napped in hoisin and plated with baby turnips and sweet Kosui pear puree kissed with vanilla bean.

A beautiful piece of Wagyu beef seems simpler by comparison, shining in its own meatiness and decorated with braised kale, baby squash, maitake mushrooms, leafy herbs and a puddle of sweet-sour umeshu consomme slow-simmered with oxtail.

Is it funny, then, that we end with a pretzel? It's not just any pretzel, of course, but a warm, soft-crisp treasure glistening in sea salt. They're served with a powerfully flavored yet odd creation of pear puree, whole mustard seed-beer vinaigrette, micro mustard greens and micro-planed, 18-month-aged Fiscalini cheddar.

The Chocolate Room

Now, we turn to sweets.

At this three-hour point, the server's descriptions are more difficult for me to keep up with, but the gist is a black sesame tartlet, more plums, grilled red peaches, black sesame ice cream, brown sugar whipped cream and black rice crisps. Another bowl holds a composition of strawberry, frozen lemon verbena and Greek yogurt.

For anyone who is exhausted reading all this, Cyrus has yet more in store.

The last stop is the Chocolate Room, where secret doors open to reveal an 8-foot liquid chocolate arch lit up with the Cyrus logo. Don't touch — the candy is molten.

