

FOOD & DRINK

BY CHERYL LURIE

A FEW DOORS down from a karaoke bar and a sandwich shop, around the corner from the Safeway delivery dock and a talking dumpster ("You are being recorded by surveillance cameras...") blooms an oasis: Espresso Yourself cafe, now open on Fillmore at the corner of Ellis.

The coffee shop, with its new-store smell, brings sparkle and cheer to an otherwise challenging time and location. The planter-lined outdoor patio provides morning sun for patrons reading the paper or using the free WiFi; inside, owner-baristas Agatha and Gene Marczak whip up fair trade, organic cappuccinos and lattes that warm the heart.

Originally from Poland, the Marczaks moved to the Bay Area more than 20 years ago after living in New York and Texas.

"We came to San Francisco to find a home," says Gene, "not because of the jobs." The couple decided to ditch their careers in a Silicon Valley semiconductor cube farm for a more passionate calling: a cafe that recalls their European roots while providing a personal connection to the neighborhood.

"We want it to be like you're coming over to our house to have coffee and conversation," says Agatha. "You can borrow a book from the shelf, or sit and use the Internet, just like family."

The borrow-a-book shelf — their son David's idea — contains an eclectic library, ranging from *Frankenstein* to the *Funk and Wagnall's Dictionary*. Patrons are welcome to add books.

Express Yourself is located at 1406 Fillmore Street.

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The regulars are a cross-section of the ever-more-vital Fillmore Jazz District: commuters, hipsters, delivery guys from the Safeway and seniors from the nearby assisted-living residences.

"The people are like sunshine around here," says Agatha as she sets down a coffee for an older patron. An enthusiastic customer chimes in, "A new kind of friendliness comes to the neighborhood!"

The cafe's hours extend into the evenings until 9 — and on Friday and Saturday until 10 — to catch the crowds coming and going from nearby performances. Yoshi's jazz club is nearly next door, and the Sheba Piano Lounge is across the street.

"People may want to socialize with a cup of coffee," says Gene. "And we like to accommodate the neighborhood."

Still a work in progress, Espresso Yourself's owners hope to add a local lunch menu to their current offerings from a South San Francisco bakery.

"That way, when we grow, all the money stays here and benefits the local businesses," says Gene.

"Some folks said you have to be stupid to start a new business now," he says. "But good comes with hardship. We learn to problem-solve better, making a business more successful. We went through the dot-com bust here, and we believe there is no better system anywhere in the world than America. We have a passion for this business and want to give people variety. And there is plenty of room for everybody to succeed here."

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■ NEW NEIGHBOR

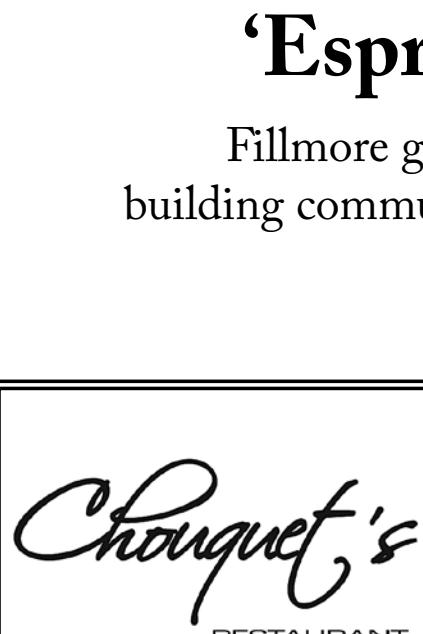
'Espresso Yourself'

Fillmore gets another coffee shop, building community in the jazz district



"A new kind of friendliness comes to the neighborhood," says a patron of the cafe.

■ NEW NEIGHBOR



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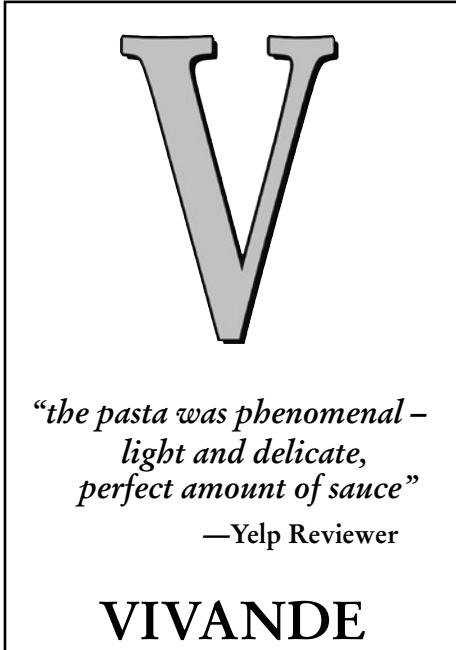


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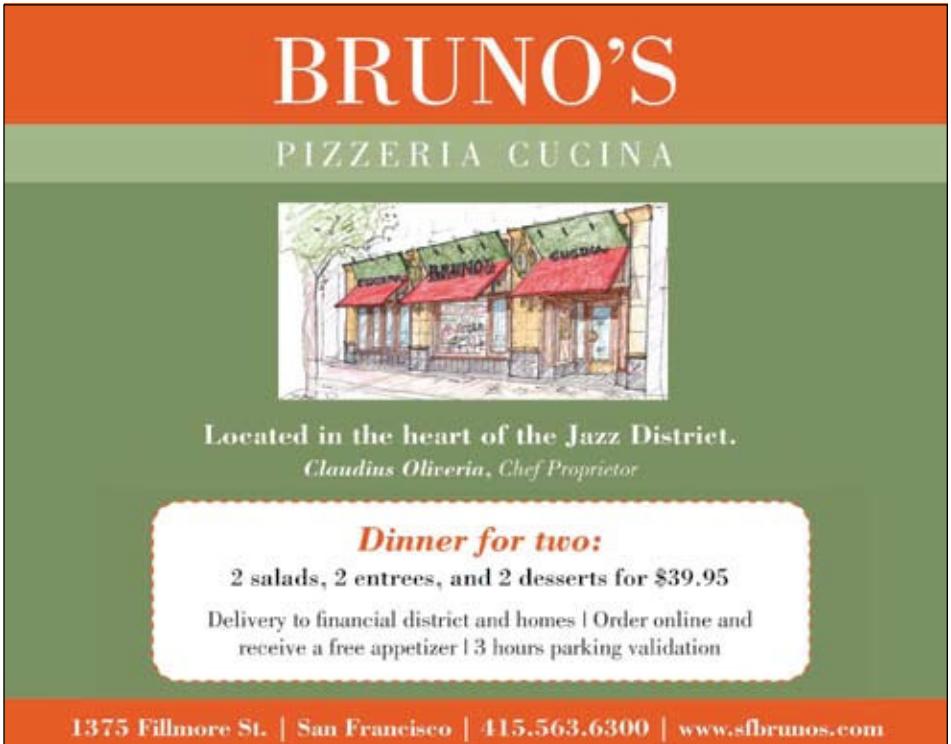


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CHRISTOPHER WRIGHT

■ FIRST PERSON

Opening Night at Via Veneto

BY ANDRE BOLAFFI

IT WAS A Friday night in January 1990. We had been in our new home on Bush Street for five years.

Janice, my wife, suggested we walk up Fillmore to the Clay Theatre to see a French film, *Claudine-Claudel*, about Rodin, his work and his mistress. We went to the 7 o'clock show with plans to have dinner afterward.

The movie was sold out, but we managed to *excuse* and *pardon* our way to the remaining two empty seats in the dead center of a front row. After half an hour, I said to Janice — quietly, I'm sure, despite the shushes from nearby theatergoers — "If something doesn't develop soon, I'm going to leave."

"You can't leave," she said.

An hour into the film, having endured enough, I decided to leave.

"You can't leave," said Janice, "you'll disturb all these people."

"Watch me," I responded, and I *excused* and *pardon* my way down the row and out of the theater.

Across the street, a new restaurant called Via Veneto looked lively, full of people and all lit up. I decided to check it out while the movie dragged on.

As I opened the door and stepped inside, I was met with a celebratory crowd of fashionably dressed people in jackets and ties and dresses and heels. I noticed the restaurant had no chairs; its tables were pushed up against the walls and filled with delectable looking antipasta.

Before I could think much about it, a waiter offered a glass of red wine. Wow, what a great new restaurant. I began to enjoy myself, while keeping an eye on the Clay across the street.

The clientele was jovial and friendly. A smartly dressed man approached

me and asked, "And how do you know Salvatore?"

"Salvatore? Well, you know..."

Before I could embarrass myself, he saved me by asking, "From North Beach?"

"Yes, of course, from North Beach," I cheerfully agreed.

I was continuing to enjoy the wine, the food and the company when a statuesque brunette approached.

"Hi," she said, "and how do you know Massimo?"

Now I knew Salvatore was from North Beach, but who in the world was Massimo? Think fast.

"Well," I responded, "you know, Salvatore is..."

"But of course," she said, "Massimo and Salvatore both worked in..."

"...North Beach," I chimed in.

Again the conversation was interrupted by the jostling crowd. I noticed that *Claudine-Claudel* must have finally — mercifully — ended, since people were exiting the theatre. I made my way toward the door to tell Janice about this wonderfully friendly new restaurant. Just as I opened the door and was about to step outside, a fellow grabbed my arm.

"Leaving so soon?" he asked warmly.

"No," I said, "I'm just going across the street to bring my wife back."

"Wonderful!" he said.

Filled with wine and bravado by now, I turned and asked him confidently, "And how do you know Massimo?"

He looked at me and responded: "I am Massimo!"

Later I found out: That was Via Veneto's opening night celebration, by invitation only. And we've been crashing this wonderful neighborhood restaurant ever since.

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