

RESTAURANT PROFILE



CHEF GERALD HIRIGOYEN

# Piperade

*Fresh local produce is an essential element of earthy French Basque cuisine.*

BY BETSY ALEXANDER

Piperade, owned by Chef Gerald Hirigoyen and his wife Cameron, is located on Battery Street in the Embarcadero neighborhood of San Francisco. The restaurant is named for piperade, the colorful ragout of green peppers, tomatoes, onions and garlic that Basques incorporate into almost every dish. Piperade embodies the robust tastes, sense of tradition and celebratory soul of Basque cuisine.

Hirigoyen, a native of the French Basque region, is well known to San Franciscans from his long-running, popular bistro, Fringale. "The menu there has been influenced by my heritage," he says. "But I've always wanted to own a restaurant with my wife and to freely present my inter-

pretation of my native cuisine." This dream came true in late September 2002 when Hirigoyen bought out his partner in another restaurant, Patis, and transformed it into what is now Piperade, featuring what Hirigoyen likes to call "West Coast Basque Cuisine."

As guests enter, they find a casually festive atmosphere in the revamped dining room with its oak flooring and tables dressed in red and blue striped runners.

"Conviviality is a hallmark of Basque restaurants," says Cameron Hirigoyen. "We placed wine barrels around the restaurant and have an oversized square table in the center [called the Sheepherder's table] where we can either serve food family style to larger groups or individually to customers attracted by the idea of a commu-

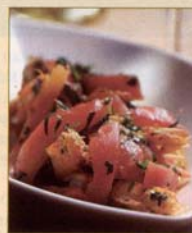
nal table." From the main dining room, a wall of glass doors opens onto a sheltered, cozy patio for al fresco dining year round.

The restaurant showcases the vibrant, rustic mélange of French and Spanish flavors that make up Basque cuisine. Hirigoyen, who literally wrote the book on Basque cooking, *The Basque Kitchen* (HarperCollins, 1999), interweaves personal stories and Basque history with hearty, soul-satisfying traditional dishes brought up to date by his California sensibilities.

"I use the ingredients I find here on the West Coast and give them a little touch of Basque magic," says Hirigoyen. Among the dishes that fulfill this description are Monterey Bay squid with raisins, foie gras and potatoes and braised lamb shoulder with a glistening sauce of pounded nuts.

The menu begins with tipia (small plates) including crisp crab croquettes and cheese with cherry preserves and quince paste, a traditional pairing in the Basque country. Tipia tend to be finger foods that make ideal appetizers or small bites to accompany one of the Basque wines featured on the wine list.

Hirigoyen has access to ingredients that his



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Piperade

predecessors, the old San Francisco Basque boardinghouses such as Hôtel de France, Des Alpes and the Basque Hôtel, did not have. There were none of the piquant peppers that express Basque cuisine's sunny character such as piquillos or the powdered piments d'Espelette for piperade.

Hirigoyen's menu for December shows his love for fresh produce. Starting with tipia, he offers butter lettuce salad with fresh herbs; endive salad with persimmon, pomegranate, blondes (a varietal nut similar in taste to a macadamia that the chef gets from the Sacramento area) and walnut vinaigrette; and warm potato and seared tuna salad with caperberries and espelette pepper.

His handia (big plates) include sautéed breast of chicken with wild mushrooms and roasted pears, steamed Pacific snapper with spinach and fried garlic vinaigrette, filet of monkfish with braised carrots and fennel, and braised veal cheeks in red wine, jus d' épices, salisifs and sunchokes.

His euskaldun (Basque classics) also incorporate fresh seasonal produce such as his special for Saturdays in December, roasted pork tenderloin with braised cabbage and figs.

Seasonal vegetables are offered as a side dish with all of these categories.

Piperade's dessert menu is tempting with luscious offerings including Kefir cheese yogurt napoleon with honey and pumpkin purée,

almond and pear tart with caramel sauce, orange blossom beignets, gâteau Basque with mango coulis, and walnut and sheep's milk cheese gratin.

Hirigoyen sources his fresh produce primarily from GreenLeaf, a broker/wholesaler on the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market. "I've been dealing with them for a long time. They get me



what I need," he says. Hirigoyen goes to the Marin County farmer's market on the weekends to "see what's going on." He also attends the open houses that GreenLeaf holds a few times a year. "GreenLeaf displays things for us to see and taste. When you see things, you get reacquainted with the items in front of you," he adds.

Piperade's wine list, assembled by Hirigoyen and master sommelier Emmanuel Kemiji, includes some 200 selections. About 15 percent

of their selections are Basque wines from purveyors around the world. "We have to have Basque wines because of who we are. Most of our wines are from France and California. We've chosen wines from boutique wineries and artisans who are passionate about what they do every day of their lives," Hirigoyen states.

In 1980, Hirigoyen moved from the kitchens of Paris to those of San Francisco where he set down roots and has been winning praise from local and national press ever since. *Food & Wine Magazine* selected him as one of the Ten Best New Chefs in America in 1994, and *San Francisco Focus Magazine* tapped him as its 1995 Chef of the Year. **pb**

Piperade

1015 Battery Street, near Green  
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415-391-2555

Hours:  
Dinner: Monday through Saturday  
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Lunch: Monday through Friday  
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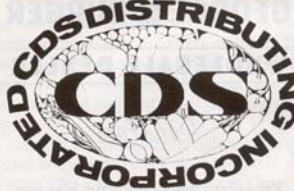
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