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Taking up the gauntlet in Gourmet Ghetto

By John Birdsall
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Gregoire Jacquet's socca may be some of the quirkiest things to come out of an East Bay oven since Pizza Antica started charring ultra-thin-crust pizzas in Lafayette. Try the Cod (\$6.25), an individual-size disc of blackened chickpea-flour dough. It's smeared with purple-black olive tapenade and whiskery flakes of salt cod, with a squiggle of lemony aioli on top.

The crust, where it's not blackened, has that gravelly garbanzo bean taste, the cod is sweeter and milder than your average tuna fish sandwich, and the olive paste is salty and tannic in a way that makes your mouth water. Even the aioli is surprisingly delicate, a clean whiff of lemon without the burn of too much garlic.

There's no doubting Jacquet's ability to charm with even the most unlikely dishes. And it can't be easy establishing your street credibility in Berkeley's Gourmet Ghetto. Not when you're within throwing distance (with a disc of artisan washed-rind cheese) of the Cheeseboard Collective, and the resinous fragrance of wood smoke from the pizza oven at Cafe Chez Panisse is a heady reminder of the neighborhood's plush tenants.

But Jacquet has done it twice. First in 2002 with the opening of Gregoire, his boutique takeout food shop that scored instant approval from a very Berkeley mix of the affluently young and scruffy and the affluently old and scruffy. The 36-year-old native of Versailles, France, cooked up an amiable persona for himself, thanks to unshaven Gallic charm and signature knit caps (his wife makes them). He branded his shop with a cursive logo that's loopy and playful (it reminds you of "Babar" and "The Little Prince"), and delicious potato croquettes.

Last month, Jacquet unleashed the equivalent of a hip-hop throwdown with Socca Oven, a gleaming food counter in Berkeley's new Epicurious Garden gourmet food mall.

What's socca? On the streets of the French city of Nice, they're rough snacks, rounds of chickpea-flour dough baked quickly into something halfway between flatbread and crepes, topped with olive oil and black pepper. Jacquet's decision to open a socca stand is genius: Nothing makes North Berkeley tingle quite like the idea of meridional France (chalk that up to Alice Waters), and socca are pure Provence.

In Jacquet's hands, Provence's primordial pizza becomes -- a pizza. Only pizza without tomato sauce or cheese, topped with a mess of carefully considered, mostly organic ingredients. You already know my favorite, the Cod. Onion (\$5.25) is nearly as good, combining plush clumps of chestnut-brown caramelized onions, a flurry of sliced kalamata olives and anchovy fillets.

I'm ambivalent about the Lamb (\$7.25). The crust is studded with squares of roast eggplant, lumps of long-braised lamb and dribbles of shiny, terra-cotta-colored rouille. I want to love it, but the lamb has a sticky, gelatinous quality from long cooking, and the rouille is bland. Zucchini (\$5.25) is boring, muffled in thick layers of paper-thin green and yellow squash, tomato and a sprinkling of coarsely ground Espelette pepper. And Chicken (\$6.75) falls to earth, weighed down with thick slices of dried-out bird.

If the charm of Jacquet's socca doesn't quite survive microscopic analysis, the pleasure of buying them inside Epicurious Garden makes his socca seem so much more than the sum of their ingredients. Two doors up from Chez Panisse, the place is a Ferry Building-style slice of foodie indulgence, albeit on a much smaller scale and with a contemporary wood-and-concrete vibe that feels both stately and informal.

You can score soup and fancy caviar, Ciao Bella gelato, sushi from Berkeley's perennially popular Kirala, fancy teas from Imperial Court and slugs of wine doled out from electronic tasting stations (a la VinoVenue in San Francisco). Socca Oven may be the most handsome of all the stalls, with walls covered in faux-painted copper patina, a rambling open prep kitchen and a gas-fired Wood Stone oven that serves as irresistible focal point.

If Socca Oven is a good spot for Saturday lunch, Jacquet's second Gregoire takeout food shop is an appealing place to pick up dinner before braving the slow crawl home through the Caldecott.

Gregoire Number Two inhabits a small, Julia Morgan-designed storefront on Oakland's Piedmont Avenue, midway between kid-friendly Fenton's Creamery and Bay Wolf, the East Bay's proto-Cal-Med upscale restaurant. It's a fitting location: Gregoire strives to infuse weeknight family takeout with the sensibilities of fine restaurant cooking.

Though Gregoire is focused on takeout, you can eat there, on a narrow counter that looks out on the street or a few barstools smack up against the demonstration cooking line. It's amazing to be so close to the cooking -- you can talk to the line cook as he dredges halibut cheeks in flour, or tosses a thin steak onto the gas grill. Sometimes -- when the orders pile up and the flustered cook starts flailing and mumbling to himself -- you feel a little too close to the action. But the closeness underscores the idea that the kitchen has absolutely nothing to hide. You become intimately involved with your dinner. It all feels a bit like a cooking demo.

The simple menu changes every month. April brings meaty, sparkingly fresh Sauteed Alaskan Halibut Cheeks (\$15) with a little plastic cup of pale, cold onion relish. Grilled Montana Top Sirloin Steak (\$16.50) has good beef flavor, but it's been marinated too long and the texture is slightly flannelly. It comes with a mango relish that's nice rather than amazing (the mango's been poached, I think, and has the texture of canned peaches).

A Catalan Farm Red Lettuce Salad (\$5.50) is cold and refreshing, with dark brown croutons and a typically French dose of spicy Dijon mustard in the vinaigrette. Soup of the Day (\$4.25) -- today it's roasted shallot and carrot -- has a typically French suaveness, a mild, sweet vegetal flavor and silken unctuousness.

Few chefs do potatoes as well as Jacquet. Crispy Potato Puffs (\$4.25), Gregoire's signature croquettes, are delicious as ever, rusty-brown and crispy on the outside, creamy and appealingly pasty inside. Green Garlic Potato Gratin (\$4.25) is fantastic, with a delicate brown crust and a soft interior enhanced with a puree of green garlic shoots. The whiff of allium is as charming and refined as Gregoire itself.

Reach East Bay food writer John Birdsall at jwbirdsall@sbcglobal.net.

Socca Oven

2 1/2 forks

(Overall value rating of our visit; out of a possible 5)

REVIEW VISIT ON APRIL 17

Food

- CUISINE: Socca.

- PRICES: \$ (\$5.25-\$7.25).
- FOOD COST (before tax and tip): \$30.75; five socca.
- HOME RUN: Cod.
- STRIKEOUT: Chicken.
- DESSERTS: None.

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(Service and ambience rating out of a possible 5)

Details

- WHERE: 1511 Shattuck Ave. (in the Epicurious Garden mall), Berkeley.
- HOURS: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays; 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Sundays.
- CONTACT: 510-548-6001.
- PARKING: Metered street parking.
- KIDS: Socca toppings might be too adult for most kids.
- DATE OPENED: March 18.

GREGOIRE OAKLAND

3 1/2 forks

(Overall value rating of our visit; out of a possible 5)

REVIEW VISIT ON APRIL 18

Food

- CUISINE: Upscale takeout.

- PRICES: \$\$ (entrees \$14.50-\$16.50).
- FOOD COST (before tax and tip): \$53.50; one soup, one salad, two entrees, one dessert.
- HOME RUN: Sauteed Alaskan Halibut Cheeks; Crispy Potato Puffs.
- STRIKEOUT: None.
- VEGETARIAN: Three choices, including soup.
- DESSERTS: Mango Mousse with Chocolate Sauce (\$3.75) is airy and delicate.

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(Service and ambience rating out of a possible 5)

Details

- WHERE: 4001 B Piedmont Ave. (at 40th Street), Oakland.
- HOURS: Lunch 11 a.m.-4:30 p.m. daily; dinner 4:30-9 p.m. daily.
- CONTACT: 510-547-3444.
- PARKING: Metered street and lot parking.
- KIDS: Good -- lots of flexibility.
- DATE OPENED: Feb. 21.