

EAST BAY **express**

MAY 14, 2003 | VOLUME 25, NO. 31 | THE EAST BAY'S FREE WEEKLY

Voodoo Doctor

Sharon Caulder
exorcises
werewolves
and other
malevolent
spirits.



The Kitchen Sink

Kauffman's Top Ten

The fried calamari at the Rex reminded me it was time to compile my annual top ten. These are the dishes I've told everyone about, the ones I spent months scheming how to score more of, the ones that actually invaded my dreams. In no particular order, they are:

1. Vegetarian yellow birds, Peking Eastern House (Freemont). Golden tofu skins are stuffed with earthy dried mushrooms and crunchy vegetables, curled into big tortellini (nesting birds?), and braised in a faintly sweet vegetable-stock sauce.

2. French onion soup, Le Bistro (Walnut Creek). The biggest, richest version around, from the depths of its cognac-infused beef broth to the bubbly Gruyère crust covering the top.

3. Prime rib, McNamara's Steak & Chop House (Dublin). McNamara's claims to roast its wet-aged Angus prime rib for seven hours. However it does it, the result is a nearly fatless, juicy cut whose every fiber vibrates with flavor.

4. Fried oysters, S&S Seafood (Oakland). S&S's cornmeal-crusted mollusks come out of the fryer tasting like custard fritters, so creamy inside that you wonder how they hold their shape.

5. California Estate Osetra, Tsar Nicoulai (sold at Whole Foods Markets). One exposure to the fresh-tasting, mildly briny, almost creamy flavor of this sustainably produced, Sacramento Valley-grown sturgeon roe made me a fan. Yet another victory of Alice Waters' "delicious revolution."

6. Meza platter, Zatar (Berkeley). Velvety grilled eggplant slices soaked in olive oil frame marinated olives and dollops of

hummus, creamy *baba ghanoush*, and a lemony *lebna bil kusa*. Dip the coriander-spiked falafel into the *muhamara*, a sweet, tangy puree of roasted red peppers, walnuts, and pomegranates.

7. Ma la kidney, Dragon 2000 (Walnut Creek). Following a tip from a colleague at the *Chronicle*, I drove to Walnut Creek just to sample this dish. Oh my God, it's not organ meat — it's the silkiest pork you've ever tasted. Floral Sichuan peppercorn oil distracts the palate until the chiles land a sharp kick. And I hate kidney.

8. Potato puffs, Grégoire (Berkeley). Grégoire is a take-out restaurant, but you aren't allowed to make it home with these cheesy fritters. Burn every finger on these ephemeral, paper-skinned mashed-potato puffs the moment they're handed to you. Because once they cool down they're just superb, not sublime.

9. Al pastor tacos, El Ojo de Agua (Oakland). Brick-red with chiles. Roasted so long the cooks probably don't have to use a knife to shred the pork. So meaty you wonder if they raised the pig on bouillon cubes. Topped with sassy tomatillo salsa and flashy onions. And less than \$2 a pop.

10. Steamed live prawns, Legendary Palace (Oakland). The waiters will show you just how live these wriggling crustaceans are, and then — oop! — five minutes later you'll be picking apart the sweetest, most tender prawns you've ever tasted and dipping them in a chili-spiked dipping sauce.

Runners-up: Homemade *roti* wrapped around lamb curry, Curry Corner (Hayward); duck liver and frisée salad, Zax Tavern (Berkeley); sweetbreads *cassolette*, La Salamandre (Danville); grilled mussels, Huynh (Oakland); fried rice, Ramen House Ryowa (Berkeley). ■

If you have a piece of hot dish you'd like to throw into the Kitchen Sink, contact Jonathan Kauffman at Jonathan.kauffman@eastbayexpress.com