

# SANTÉ

FOR RESTORATION PROFESSIONALS

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two men  
one vision  
four stars

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# What's HAUTE

# in Healdsburg

What succeeds in the business of fine dining, Peyton continues, "is to create a spiritual path, an emotional path, and a financial path that support all those involved. If you can achieve that, then it translates to the guest." Fame and fortune, he infers, will follow. It certainly has in the case of two-year-old Cyrus, newly christened with four stars from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, two stars from *Michelin Guide*, and glittering accolades from media royalty. Clearly the partners are on the path Peyton extols, but it's hardly the one of least resistance.

## Smart Move

Making a giant leap of faith about a Healdsburg location was the first hurdle for Peyton and Keane. Both partners had carved out their careers in urbane metro restaurants (Peyton at the San Francisco Ritz Carlton and Restaurant Gary Danko; Keane at the Four Seasons, Lespinasse, Jardiniere, and as Gary Danko's sous chef), so the move to laid-back Healdsburg was radical. With Peyton and Keane aiming to create a premier dining experience on par with Thomas Keller's French Laundry in Yountville, many friends and colleagues advised them to choose a similar site in the heart of Napa's well-heeled wine country. But Chef Keane was the first to defend Healdsburg's viability. "To me it felt right," he recalls. "It's a straight shot down the highway from San Francisco, there's much less competition than in Napa, and Santa Rosa south of Healdsburg is a big town with upscale development . . . the demographics made sense."

Sweetening the decision was the offer from a developer that Cyrus be the anchor restaurant of a new luxury boutique hotel planned for downtown Healdsburg. The partners began their plans for Cyrus—named after trapper Cyrus Alexander, who discovered Sonoma's Alexander Valley—but it took nearly four years for the location adjacent to Les Mars Hotel to be completed.

Peyton and Keane launched Cyrus with capital from 28 investors, each contributing a modest sum of about \$25,000. "It's like a big family," Peyton says, explaining their financing. "We wanted a lot of people caring about us . . . who allow us to reinvest profits and create the business that we want. With other types of loans, the money can be fairly cheap, but repayment must be made at certain times, and it dictates how you run your restaurant."

Without immediate bottom-line pressures, Peyton and Keane have been able to indulge their vision. In the first year, for example, Keane didn't even look at food costs. "The only thing that mattered was to make guests happy and establish a reputation," he says. Now he reviews ingredient prices as needed but finds that since Cyrus's four-star review and sold-out seatings, suppliers are eager to please. "We spend so much money now," the chef reports. "I can usually tell suppliers what I want to pay. I don't beat them up . . . but incrementals really add up for us."

As the restaurant took off following the media raves, the partners made the unorthodox decision to take seatings away,

Opposite, clockwise left to right: Seared Hamachi with Spinach Gomasio and chilled Shoyu-Konbu Consommé; Thai-Marinated Lobster with Avocado, Mango, and Hearts of Palm; Three Custards: Sweet Pineapple Panna Cotta, Chocolate, Cranberry Sourdough Bread Pudding, and Mousse of Crème Brûlée; Rice Flake crusted Rouget with Fingerling Potatoes, Nira, and Red Curry Sauce; Strawberry-Rhubarb Compote with Sour Ice Cream.

reducing covers (and revenue) from about 100 a night to 85. "There was just too much hustle in the dining room, and we felt it in the kitchen," says Keane, whose labor-intensive menu is exclusively tailored to the guest with three- to five-course dinner choices (\$68 to \$92, sans alcohol, as well as \$15 for each additional course). Each diner selects from any part of the menu, which changes "constantly, according to the season or my boredom," Keane remarks. Some of the chef's recent inspirations include Sea Bream with Galangal Noodles, Spicy Banana Blossoms, and Coconut Milk Broth; Farro Pasta with Creamed Spinach, Poached Egg, and Truffle Froths; and Seared Foie Gras à la Pineapple Baba au Rhum (served flambeed, tableside). The menu is designed to be a freewheeling prix fixe; guests can order any sequence of dishes—even multiple dessert courses, if they so choose. For the penultimate Cyrus experience, the kitchen will direct a seven-course chef's tasting menu (\$110; \$200 with wine).

#### Relationship Resources

One of the few benefits of Cyrus's much-delayed opening was that the partners had ample time to assemble "a cadre of top-flight professionals," as Peyton

calls their staff. Healdsburg itself yielded few experienced candidates, but Peyton was optimistic they could attract the all-stars they needed: "My litany is that if you build it, they will come." Explaining his faith, he adds, "I'm a one-trick pony . . . this is what I do. And so now after 30 years of managing restaurants, I've developed a reputation and more than a few relationships." The result being that several captains and back waiters, the general manager, a hostess, and a sommelier all left secure positions in San Francisco and elsewhere to migrate to Healdsburg on the belief that whatever Peyton was involved in would prosper.

For Chef Keane, recruiting his opening kitchen crew was considerably more angst-ridden. Although he had his right-hand man, Sous Chef Drew Glassell, on board, and talented Pastry Chef Annie Clemmons in the wings, Keane needed cooks. And not just any cooks. More like culinary soldiers, in fact. "With my first crew, I told them how hard it was going to be, how disciplined, how much they were going to clean," Keane recalls, "and what we would expect, and what we wouldn't tolerate. I had the talk of death with them. I tried to scare them so ultimately it wouldn't be as bad as they thought."

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—Nick Peyton**

Even so, the rigors of Keane's kitchen proved too much for most; in the first year he saw a 90 percent turnover in his crew. "There was a lot of disillusionment in the beginning," the chef states, unapologetically. "One hundred percent dedication brings a certain discipline and obedience with it. This is not a meathead kitchen. For instance, we don't cook with tongs. They're used almost everywhere, but we don't allow tongs because people rape food with tongs . . . you have to learn how to touch and feel and respect the food. So we use a spoon. That's a hard adjustment for most cooks." Keane's culinary standards also demand perfect results. "Cooks by nature are defensive, so if you tell them to throw out a piece of fish they cooked because it's slightly overdone or has a small burnt edge, they take it personally. Sure, people make mistakes, and we walk them through it afterward, but in the middle of service, there's no discussion. Throw it out, and do it over."

Keane's staffing pains were almost instantly mitigated by the power of the press. "Now with the reviews, the cooks get it," he says. "Everything has changed. Résumés come in all the time." Given the intense work demanded of his four-star food, Keane still expects and encourages a regular turnover of staff in the kitchen. "Cooks have about a two-year cycle max. They get too tired in the same kitchen. In two years you get to show them your repertoire, then they need to move on."





Despite his four-star food at Cyrus, Chef Doug Keane (right) scoffs at celebrity. "We're just skilled laborers," he says of himself and kitchen colleagues Drew Glassoff, sous chef, and Annie Clemmons, pastry chef.

## A Matter of Time

By contrast, Peyton aims for longevity among his dining room staff. "The longer the team stays together," the maître'd insists, "the better they will be . . . more seamless, more confident. And guests who come in and know each face already have a sense of trust."

Hospitality training is ongoing at Cyrus, because "every last one of us needs to be reminded of every step of service," Peyton insists. "If you don't review every single step regularly, things will erode. No matter how basic it is—how you put down a plate, how you set a table, when to use a tray—every little thing matters. You have to constantly address what is the standard and reinforce the hell out of it."

Cyrus's black-suited captains and back waiters are responsible for highly choreographed tableside service, including a caviar cart, flambe sauces, truffle shaving, a cut-to-order cheese selection, and a rolling selection of bonbons, fruit pâtés, and other sweets that guests choose as an amenity before departing. Brendan Sapp, a captain since the opening, is undaunted by the tableside specials: "It gives us more opportunity to connect with the guests and intuit what they want."

Before each dinner service, Peyton announces the guest list for the evening. "We want everyone in the room to know who is

coming," he states. The staff keeps a record of guest preferences, celebrations, and so on, on Open Table. "If I see that a person has visited us three times," says Peyton, "and I have no notes on them, I will tell the captain, 'Get me some notes. We should know more about them. What are their preferences?'" These efforts make people feel looked after."

## Discerning the Drink

Each evening at Cyrus, 60 to 75 percent of customers will opt for a pairing menu, deferring their wine decisions to Sommelier Jim Rollston. With 900 selections focusing on the significant winegrowing regions of the world, the wine list offers breadth and depth. Rollston sees the list as a constant work in progress. "Right now we have a greater demand for French wines, rather than Spanish or Italian," he explains. "And half-bottles are popular. They make sense for this kind of multi course dining." Guests are also keen to try the local Sonoma wines, of which Rollston says there are about 600 choices he must consider and a great diversity of styles. Wine prices at Cyrus reflect the standard three-times-cost markup, although Rollston uses his discretion on pricing expensive bottles.

When determining what to pour with Keane's complex dishes, the sommelier's goal is always "to create a pairing that is

## Cyrus

29 North Street  
Healdsburg, CA 95448  
707-433-3311  
cyrusrestaurant.com

**Owners** Douglas Keane/Nick Peyton

**General Manager** Robert Coffing

**Seats** 60

**Employees** management/kitchen/  
dining/bar 10/25/25/3

**Gross Annual Restaurant Revenue**

\$4 million

**Executive Chef** Douglas Keane

**Sous Chef** Drew Glassell

**Pastry Chef** Annie Clemmons

**Food Style** Contemporary luxury

**Average Dinner Check** \$125

**Average Number of Dinner Covers** 75

**Gross Annual Food Revenue**

\$2.7 million

**Wine Director** Jim Rollston

**Wine List Focus** Worldwide,  
deep in Sonoma and Burgundy

**Wines on List** (number of selections) 900

**Wines by the Glass** 40 plus

**Wine Cellar** (number of bottles) 5,500

**Average Bottle Price** \$90

**Gross Annual Wine Revenue**

\$1.3 million

**Bar Manager** Scott Beattie

**Bar Focus** Seasonal cocktails  
featuring local product

**Signature Drink** (seasonal)

Thai Boxer, Waverly Place Echo,

The Upstairs Neighbor

**Average Drink Price** \$10

**Gross Annual Spirits Revenue**

\$200,000

more than the sum of its parts." He invariably succeeds, according to one critic, who noted, "Rollston makes both elements come alive . . . his matches are both innovative and sublime."

Offstage, Rollston educates the staff with wine tastings every other week, detailed handouts, and field trips to local wineries. To keep tuned into the market and his own sensory ability, he meets each week with a small fraternity of local sommeliers for a sparring session on the exact identity of various brown-bagged vintages. "It's a great exercise," he says of the blind tasting, "even if sometimes humbling."

Bar Manager Scott Beattie also hones his skill with the help of local cohorts—farmers generally. "This place is produce paradise," exclaims Beattie, who rejects the trendy label of "mixologist" or "bar chef" but embraces the practice of using fresh and poached fruits, vegetables, spices, herbs, and other seasonings as the foundation or flourish for neo-cocktails. "As much as I love to do classic cocktails," he says, "the thing we're really getting known for are seasonal local drinks, with flavors that reflect northern California," including premium spirits from seven distilleries in the San Francisco area.

Beattie (a 2004 Santé Spirits Hospitality Award winner) not only consults with local farmers for his fresh bar staples, but also barter for ripe fruit from Healdsburg homeowners. "If I drive by and see a citrus tree in someone's yard," he explains, "I'll leave a note in their mailbox asking if they'd like to trade some fruit for restaurant credit. Everyone calls me back." The bar has a steady supply of Meyer lemons from the guy who owns the Chevy dealership; key limes come from a neighbor three blocks away; and blood oranges are clipped fresh from a local woman's backyard. Cost savings are an added bonus, but not Beattie's main intent. "It's about using the best," he states, "wherever it comes from." That goes for the bar serveware too, including the exclusive Cyrus "stork"—an elegant, curved, surgical-steel straw with two forked points at the bottom end, custom-made to serve with Beattie's "edible" drinks. "There's all kinds of things you can eat that end up on the bottom," the bartender comments. "I was tired of seeing people fish around with two plastic straws for stuff leftover. So we created this prototype. Now we have 50 on order."

At \$11 apiece, Beattie's stork isn't a cheap solution. "But it works," Peyton emphasizes. "And anytime we can work out a better way of doing something, it translates to the guest. This is our motivation . . . to be people pleasers. That's the whole essence of what we do."

➤ Elaine Khosrova is the senior editor at *Santé* and a former pastry chef.

With vaulted ceilings of waxed Venetian plaster, the Cyrus dining room has an old-world European ambience.