

A Moveable Feast

East Bay underground chef Leif Hedendal's secret supper club is part slow food, part speakeasy, and all about culinary community

TEXT & PHOTOS BY JEANNE STORCK

A friend and I drive down a Berkeley street well past dusk. The lights in most houses aren't on just yet — except for the one whose windows glitter and beckon like Christmas. All we have is this address, and a very promising menu, which reads like a poem. An orange is not an orange; it's a *cara cara*. Beans are *Rancho Gordo Borlotti*. The names of farmers (Knoll, Star Route, Lagier) and the varieties of fruits and greens dangle seductively from each ingredient.

At some point, somewhere in the blogosphere, I'd subscribed to an underground dinner mailing list. A month later, an invite popped up in my inbox from local chef Leif Hedendal (formerly of Greens and Citron) with details of a \$40 prix fixe seven-course vegetarian meal, along with the instruction to e-mail for directions.

Friends have loaned this house to Hedendal for the night, clearing everything out of the front rooms to make way for two long communal tables and elegantly mismatched wooden chairs. On the bare walls, a few hats hang from hooks. The space looks like an old Shaker meeting room. We settle in at our table, which is simply a heavy plank perched on sawhorses. The wood has vague traces of cement where it was used as a mold and its roughness artfully contrasts with the table setting — a parade of white tapers, pink tulips, lemons and limes.

Hedendal — decked out in a black J. Church t-shirt (the band, not the train) and a Dirty Girl Produce baseball cap — chats with



guests, checks the room one last time and then disappears into the kitchen. Hedendal regularly hosts these off-the-grid dinners in the homes of friends, in art spaces or in restaurants loaned for one night, skirting the conventional dining economy in favor of spontaneous, improvised meals with an emphasis on camaraderie and local organic food.

Our tablemates — a gallery owner, several artists, a pastry chef, a food and farming activist — aren't completely sure how they got on the invite list, but the mystery seems to suit the occasion. Our curiosity peaks as plates begin to arrive, carried by a trio of waitresses clad in various shades of black.

We begin with an aperitif, then bite into a crostini toast of truffle and Chioggia beets. A bowl of potato, shallot and wild nettle soup topped with a crispy slice of artichoke heart silences the table. The meal reaches its apex with an entrée of mushroom and leek galette. Then things wind down with a thin ring of pumpkin perched on a Borlotti bean and hominy stew, followed up by a frisée, cress, fennel and radish salad scattered with slivers of orange and almond.

For dessert: thin slices of Pink Lady apples dipped in lemon, Farhi dates sweet like jam, and a goat cheese called Capricious. Finally, regretfully, wishing it wouldn't end, we savor the last dish — Moscatel poached Comice pear with rosemary shortbread and Chantilly cream.

As the plates are cleared, blonde-haired San Francisco singer/songwriter Garrett Pierce squeezes into a straight-backed chair, guitar in hand, the room so quiet you can hear his fingers brush together as they pluck and glide through an acoustic cover of a Leonard Cohen song.

The woman next to me leans over and whispers, "This might be close to a perfect moment." And I whisper back, "Yes." 🍷

Visit Hedendal's blog at cookinglessons.wordpress.com