

OPEN Restaurant

Turning dining into art

BY JEANNE STORCK

On a recent spring evening in a restaurant south of Market, a crew of cooks moves busily about the kitchen turning out the night's menu, while diners immerse themselves in wine and conversation. It might look like your typical restaurant but it's not. This is OPEN, a temporary dining installation staged for one night only at New Langton Arts by Chez Panisse chefs and artists Jerome Waag and Sam White.

This is not the first time Waag, who's worked at Chez Panisse since 1986, has mixed food and art. In his most recent piece, "The Flavor of Democracy," audience members prepared, cooked and ate an elected recipe. With OPEN Restaurant, Waag and White literally deconstruct a restaurant, taking down walls so guests can watch as their food moves from farm to kitchen to plate — all at an affordable prix fixe of \$35. "Opening and running a restaurant is complicated," explains Waag. "We thought it would be interesting to make the process visible, let people see the inner workings of the restaurant — the whole cycle from field to plate."

As a friend and I enter the main gallery, a waiter escorts us to the room's centerpiece — a patch of field lifted from Cannard and Knoll farms that overflows with fava beans, potatoes and herbs still growing in their original soil. Diners take their seats in black plastic folding chairs, sidling up to impromptu communal tables topped with butcher paper while cooks move with Zen-like grace around a minimal "kitchen" constructed of hotplates, utensils and two sawhorse tables. Waag has organized the menu with an eye for efficiency, choosing foods that are simple to prepare or can be prepped in advance. A video loop of images from Cannard and Knoll Farms rolls silently on the wall above. In a far corner of the room, walk-in guests sit perched on a bleacher, glasses of wine in hand, overlooking the bustle below. "We liked the idea of restaurant as theater," Jerome says, "with people observing the activity from above."

As we settle in, Laura Parker, an artist whose work is inspired by agricultural themes, serves us two wine glasses filled with a mixture of soil and water. She sets a spray of purple and white fava bean blossom next to the first glass, explaining that the fava beans we'll eat this evening were grown in clay soil from Tairwa'-Knoll Farms, and the sprig of mustard next to the second glass was produced in a loamy soil from Cannard Farm. She invites us to make connections between the scent of the soil and the taste of the food we'll be served later.

Dishes begin to arrive with careful explanations from waiters about where ingredients were grown. A small plate of pickled carrots, artichoke hearts and thyme from Cannard brims with crisp, earthy flavors. We then dip our spoons into an appetizer of ricotta ravioli bathing in a broth of buttery green garlic and fava beans from Tairwa'-Knoll. Our entrée of tender spit-roasted pork nestles



Soil and water "tastings"



atop a bed of polenta sprinkled with mustard and fava bean blossoms, accompanied by a side of sautéed mustard greens from Cannard. For dessert, the kitchen serves up crêpes, warmed with orange butter and Grand Marnier then topped with crème fraîche, orange zest and strawberries from Catalan Farm.

The check arrives not with a mint, but a cellophane packet of spinach seeds rolled into little dirt "truffles" accompanied by a slip of paper that reads: "Seed the sensible. Harvest the impossible." As we file out past the kitchen, a waiter smiles and promises: "We'll do it again." 🌱

To learn about the next OPEN Restaurant event, join the mailing list at openrestaurant.org.