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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2019



FOOD

Small wonders

From California to Canada, micro-restaurants are proving that bigger isn't necessarily better

A secret lies beyond a nondescript door across from the bar at Santa Barbara's Montecito Inn, the boutique hotel built in 1928 by Charlie Chaplin, Fatty Arbuckle and their pals as a retreat from Hollywood up the California coast. Inside, chef Phillip Frankland Lee is preparing a multicourse, super-luxe extravaganza for just eight guests. While the windowless 400-square-foot space lined in a red curtain has the feel of a private dining room, The Silver Bough is actually one of the world's smallest—and most dramatic—restaurants.

Above: Fruit Beer Float at The Silver Bough. Right: Snow crab with beach plants and buttermilk at The Bite House

At the beginning of each meal, diners are instructed to gather around a metallic tree sculpture in the middle of the itty-bitty venue while a host explains the restaurant's name. As the story goes in Celtic folklore, when a silver tree branch, otherwise known as a bough, is discovered by mortals in the forest, the mythical relic serves as a magical gateway to a trouble-free realm of endless joy and bountiful feasts. The guests are then invited to enjoy an amuse-bouche in the shape of an apple that has seemingly fallen from the gleaming tree.

After they've savored the fruit, the red curtain surrounding them whooshes open to reveal the chef and his team behind a marble countertop overlooking the kitchen. Lee, who earned acclaim and infamy as a contestant on the 13th season of Bravo's *Top Chef*, then unleashes three acts of dishes featuring such lavish ingredients as olive Wagyu rib eye, venison loin, spiny lobster and California caviar mere inches from guests. Is this dinner or a David Lynch film? "It's very dramatic," Lee later admits, "but people crave that kind of drama."

Inspired by intricately crafted Japanese kaiseki and *omakase* experiences, Lee is among a relatively new breed of chefs eschewing sprawling establishments in favor of highly curated micro-restaurants that are equal parts speakeasy, chef's table and dinner theater. A ticket to dine at The Silver Bough costs \$550 and includes a wine pairing and gratuity. (There's an alcohol-free option for \$500.) The economics of running a micro-restaurant—no menus, expensive ingredients, a skeleton crew, little waste—means Lee is afforded freedom and control.

"Creating this experience for only eight guests a night allows us to make sure that every single aspect is delivered as it was designed," says Lee, who also runs more





traditional à la carte restaurants such as Scratch Bar & Kitchen in Encino, California. “There’s not anything that’s going to get by me that I’m not going to notice.”

Following the much lauded debuts of smaller-than-small restaurants Atera, Blanca and Momofuku Ko in New York nearly a decade ago, the micro-restaurant trend continues to spread with 20-seats-or-less venues popping up across the globe, including Shanghai’s Ultraviolet, Las Vegas’ é, Ibiza’s Sublimotion, New Orleans’ Saint-Germain and Nova Scotia’s The Bite House.

When chef Bryan Picard moved from Montreal into a century-old farmhouse on Nova Scotia’s Cape Breton Island six years ago, opening a micro-restaurant wasn’t initially his dream. “I figured it had enough charm and space on the main floor to house a tiny



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restaurant, but it couldn’t really fit more than 12 seats, so it was more out of necessity at first,” says Picard, who previously served as executive chef at the nearby Chanterelle Inn & Cottages.

For three nights a week from May to December, Picard’s much-loved Bite House serves a nine-course dinner that varies wildly depending on what he’s growing or foraging outside and procuring from local farmers and vendors. His past creations have included hot-smoked trout with pickled pumpkin and crispy rye and a goat dumpling with a bacon thyme broth and sunflower shoots.

“It turned out the format was ideal,” says Picard, who runs The Bite House with his partner and parents. “Our customers enjoy a more intimate and personal experience, and I get to have a little chat with them at the end of the night.” —DERRIK J. LANG

Clockwise from above left: At The Silver Bough, heart and liver tartlet with a mini Parker House roll; smoked quail breast; tree sculpture; chef Phillip Frankland Lee and team

TINY BITES

Other micro-restaurants worth a visit

Talula’s Table

Kennett Square, Pennsylvania

During the day, Talula’s Table is an artisanal market. At night, it’s the toughest reservation in the Philadelphia area. Each morning, restaurateur Aimee Olexy takes a single booking for an eight-course feast for a party of eight to 12 diners for exactly one year from the current date.

talulastable.com

Ultraviolet

Shanghai

The fantastical micro-restaurant utilizes state-of-the-art projectors, lights and scent diffusers to virtually transport 10 diners to scenes such as an outdoor picnic and undersea setting during a 20-course journey created by chef Paul Pairet.

uvbypp.cc

Saint-Germain

New Orleans

Inside a house in the Bywater neighborhood, chefs Trey Smith and Blake Aguiard serve such French fare as chicken-liver terrine and *coulotte* steak to 16 guests. On the third weekend of each month, they offer a full vegetarian menu—a rarity in the Crescent City.

saintgermainnola.com