

# FOOD DRINK REVIEW

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDUARDO DUARTE



ALL-STAR PERFORMANCE: The stars have aligned at Sona. Above: One of the best cheese courses in the city.

## SONA *Few restaurants in Southern California actually strive for a fifth star, and only one currently attains it*

The agent's fiancée leaned in and whispered into my ear. "I have to confess," she said. "I'm not a very adventurous eater." We had just belled up to the bar and ordered a drink, and I was already worrying that she wasn't going to enjoy herself here. The menu at Sona isn't geared toward simple tastes. I had invited the fancy agent and his girlfriend to dinner weeks ago, long before I had actually decided where we would be dining.

I chose Sona because I wasn't thrilled with any new restaurants at the moment, but also because I'd already waited too long to adjust the rating here. Exactly four years ago, I gave this restaurant four stars (out of five). A lot of things have changed since then, but other stuff hasn't. This is what I wrote in April 2003, when the chef was only 28 years old:

*David Myers cooks with the finesse of someone twice his age, yet he exhibits the boyish curiosity and unbridled experimentalism once embodied by Wolfgang Puck or Michael McCarty when they were on the verge of inventing California cuisine. He gets excited by squash the size of watermelons and mushrooms the size of ants...*

Myers, now 32, is even more fanatical than he was then. I've been back more than a half dozen times since that review, and on every visit I've found his cooking to be better and more mature than the last, especially when I've let him dictate my meal. He calls his cooking modern French, for no other reason than his freestyle approach is impossible to categorize.

The fiancée continued: "I was afraid to say anything because I didn't want to influence your decision. I hope I'm not a problem tonight."

My concern grew. Moments later, after we had taken our seats in the dining room, I explained to the couple how things would work. "You can order whatever you wish," I said. "But since this is my final visit, I reserve the

right to veto anything you order." Before I said this, the fiancée looked glamorous and confident. Now she looked nervous. She attempted a smile. "What about the short ribs?" asked the agent. I bit my tongue. I should have seen that one coming, and now I felt guilty. "Sorry," I said. "Veto. I tried the short ribs last week. They were amazing." I could feel the tension mounting.

Soon we had ordered and everyone was smiling, and then the *amuse bouche* appeared. It was a gorgeous mosaic of carrot and cardamom wrapped in mustard leaf. I devoured mine in a single bite. I looked up just in time to notice the agent following suit. And then, without exchanging a word, the two of them traded plates. She accepted his crumbs, and he acquired her untouched terrine, which he popped into his mouth without skipping a beat. My concern for her happiness deepened.

On previous visits, I have enjoyed marinated clams with poached, saffron-scented potatoes. I've been captivated by the slippery texture of caramel-braised salmon belly that was juxtaposed with Chinese sausage. If I concentrate, I can still savor an incredible piece of Wagyu beef from Japan. I've eaten ice cream as an appetizer and squash brown butter for dessert—and, against my initial instincts, loved every bite. One night, Myers slow-cooked an entire suckling pig from a place called Devil's Gulch, and I'm pretty sure everyone in the restaurant got a taste. The bite I received was a smidgen of meat, served with a couple of beans and a sprinkling of black truffle, and it is a memory I will cherish. I was actually lost in thought reminiscing in my mind about the pork while the fiancée was going on about their impending honeymoon, when a waiter interrupted:

"Caramelized sweetbreads with black truffle, CONTINUED..."



...CONTINUED pickled fennel and sunchoke purée," the waiter announced, delivering another surprise morsel from the kitchen. The chef ensures that no two tables receive exactly the same experience on any given night. I shut my eyes and allowed myself to luxuriate in the scent of truffles and thymus gland. And when my eyes opened, the fiancée's plate was empty—practically licked clean. I glanced at the agent, suspiciously. "Did you just eat her sweetbreads?" I asked. But he was as shocked as I. She grinned ear-to-ear and brought her napkin to the corner of her mouth. "I love sweetbreads," she said.

"But..." I hesitated, except the question came tumbling out anyway: "Do you know what sweetbreads are?"

"Of course," she said. "And this Pinot Gris is delicious with it, don't you think?"

That's when I finally began to relax. Until then, I hadn't allowed myself to think about the wine. In my critique five years ago, I didn't say much about it, because the selection was rather short and simple. Today, the wine director, Mark Mendoza, has stocked the cellar with more than 21,000 bottles—more than 2,000 choices—with page after page of rare Burgundies and Bordeaux, plus sought-after cult Cabernets and exquisite Rieslings. As many as 50 wines are poured by the glass on any given night.

The rest of my meal with these new friends went off without a hitch. The fiancée loved her lobster risotto. How could she not? It was velvety and zesty, with bright green slivers of kaffir lime leaves. Her macadamia-crusted opah was even better than the lobster. It was so light, it almost floated off the plate. The dessert she selected ended up being my favorite: a parfait of ginger granita, white-chocolate ice cream and braised blackberries.

For anyone who hasn't been to Sona, beware: If you come expecting an elaborate Hollywood set design, you might be disappointed in the décor. But that's precisely what I love about this place. Here's how I described it four years ago:

*In the center of the dining room rests a 6-ton granite rock from an Escondido quarry, its top polished smooth and used as a countertop for wine service. Rippled glass windows create a mesmerizing fiber-optic display powered by taillights and blinkers whizzing past on La*

**SONA:** 401 N. LA CIENEGA BLVD., LOS ANGELES, 310.659.7708 **HOURS:** TUES.–THURS., 6–10:30PM; FRI., 6–11:30PM; SAT. 5:30–11:30PM **WHO'S THERE:** THE MAYOR WITH HIS CAMPAIGN DONORS, IMPORTANT CHEFS FROM OUT OF TOWN, JAPANESE TOURISTS AND WINE BARONS **WHAT TO WEAR:** THE ELEGANT ROOM DICTATES AN AIR OF DIGNITY AND CLASS, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU CAN'T GET AWAY WITH A GREAT PAIR OF JEANS IF YOU THINK YOUR BUTT LOOKS REALLY GOOD IN THEM. **ABOUT THE COFFEE:** THIS IS THE BEST COFFEE (ESPECIALLY THE DECAF) OF ANY RESTAURANT IN L.A., PERIOD. **ABOUT THE NOISE:** JUST QUIET ENOUGH TO WHISPER, BUT JUST LOUD ENOUGH THAT WE COULDN'T HEAR WHAT THE MAYOR WAS DISCUSSING AT THE NEXT TABLE **WHAT IT COSTS:** APPETIZERS, \$16–\$21; ENTRÉES, \$34–\$48; CHEESE, \$15–\$30; DESSERTS, \$12; TASTING MENUS FROM \$89; VALET PARKING, \$5.50. **RATING:** ★★★★★

What the stars mean: 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.



**RAISING THE BAR:** The cocktails are as innovative as the food. Above: Macadamia-crusted opah with roasted pumpkin.

*Cienega Boulevard. Walls are completely void of decoration. Art comes only from the kitchen, and the exhibit changes constantly...*

The restaurant closed briefly in 2005 for a light refurbishment, but little changed. The lighting feels softer. The bathrooms are supremely more comfortable. The 90-seat room feels more alive, almost electric. And the service is still among the best in L.A. Previously, I offered this observation:

*It seemed appropriate to ask for chopsticks. The restaurant didn't have any, but our waiter dashed down the street and returned with two pairs just in time for our next course.*

The waiters, who now wear dark suits, provide chopsticks with any dish that takes its inspiration from Asia, such as the terrific hamachi that the agent ordered. It was ever-so-slightly torched and draped across thimble-sized mounds of black and white rice. But his chopsticks just sat there. I felt obligated to say something, but I didn't. The restaurant now employs a guy whose sole job, it appears, is to serve the cheese. He's a lanky, curly-haired fellow who talks about cheese the way other people might gossip about Brangelina or the Beckhams. He's clearly excited about every juicy detail of how the cheese is made and where it's been. Most of what he said went right over my head, except, "The rind on this one," he said, pointing to a cheese whose name I don't recall, and whose crust had apparently gone to rot, "is nothing but mold and dirt. But most Americans eat it anyway."

For the record: Mold and dirt have never tasted so good. ☑

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