

A massive marquee lists the day's menu at Verjus in San Francisco.

THE ESSAY

The Ultimate Paris Wine Bar is in San Francisco

Verjus nails French chic without even trying.

By Rachel Khong

WHEN I CAN'T TAKE a real vacation (say, to Paris) because there's too much to do and too much real life to attend to, I escape to Verjus, which comes in at a close second. Once upon a time, someone might have said San Francisco was the most European of American cities. These days, with the motorized scooters and chain yoga studios and a plethora of backs strapped with tech company-branded backpacks ... well, I don't know. But stepping into Verjus, the recently opened bottle shop and wine bar from husband-and-wife restaurateurs Michael and Lindsay Tusk, immediately transports you: For a moment, at least, you feel as though you're somewhere else. Possibly somewhere that doesn't even exist. When life feels like it's moving too fast, Verjus is the ideal place to press pause.

The Tusks know plenty about making a good restaurant: They're the team behind the triple-Michelin-starred Quince and the more casual Cotogna. They opened Verjus earlier this year across from the Transamerica Pyramid's tall spike of a skyscraper with its surrounding transplanted Santa Cruz redwoods. Much like those redwoods, Verjus feels charmingly both out of place and perfectly at home, distinct and standalone.

From the moment you step inside, you're taken out of your everyday life. The ceilings are as high as a church's and as glossy and reflective as a shiny red apple. From here, choose your own adventure: On the bottle-shop side, where you enter, you can order yourself some wine and tinned fish off the shelves and pretend you're in Barcelona (or, to be more French, Marseille). Or you could continue on to the striking restaurant: spacious, with a long, beautiful bar and a daily-changing menu on the enormous retro marquee, which lists the dishes as though they were feature films. The food is an unfussy and very charming mix of mostly French options, ranging from light (frisée) to heavy (steak); some are both (pâté en croûte).

When you sit down, the first thing to appear before you is a basket of sliced baguette, as crusty and good as you'd find in Paris. On every table are tiny, handsome tins of Portuguese olive oil for sopping and French sel de mer for sprinkling.



In line with the restaurant's soul, the wine list, curated by beverage director Matt Cirne, is unstuffy, exciting, and unexpected; in current Paris fashion, it leans toward natural wines, including those from the talented California-based winemakers Martha Stoumen and Laura Brennan Bissell, plus French bottles from the Loire and Bordeaux. The food is well balanced (halibut crudo bright with cucumber; translucent sliced fennel and radish with anchovies on jammy tomato; a perfect morel ragout with fava beans and egg yolk), but the meat dishes—like the wide-girthed Manchego sausage—can be rib-sticking, even with the sauerkraut and ample spoons of mustard; personally, I'd get a crisp, cold glass of something pleasantly, even bracingly, acidic if you choose to go that route.

Though Verjus exudes a devil-may-care attitude—casually tilting tulips; a diner-style napkin dispenser, for charm—it's clear that much care has been taken and attention paid to the smallest of details. Cookbooks and knickknacks are arranged just so on warm wood shelves set against painted white brick. The music that plays is from a well-curated record collection; you'll hear jazz and soul and the familiar scratch that tells you the record needs flipping, though not for long. Someone will be on it in short order.

The vibe is eclectic and cheerful, the service amicable and not aggressive. For me, this is the food I want to eat all the time: irreverent, playful, and deftly executed. That's what's so Parisian about Verjus, of course—how chic it manages to be without even trying.

End the meal with the fluffiest, most tender doughnuts dipped into chocolate sauce or lemon curd. Or a classic pain perdu. The bread might be lost, but you are not. Or maybe you are, but in time and space, by your own design.