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#### Q & A with Comstock Saloon Chef Carlo Espinas, Part 1

By [John Birdsall, SFoodie Editor](#), Tuesday, Jun. 1 2010 @ 4:11PM



Liza Gershman 2010

Carlo Espinas.

Blame [Bourdain](#) for the macho chef meme: the tortured misfit delivered from junkie oblivion by a dedication to his culinary craft, a dedication only slightly stronger than an addiction to Marlboros and Jack. Carlo Espinas isn't that kind of chef. The 30-year-old who heads up the kitchen at [Comstock Saloon](#) — the Barbary Coast homage by [Absinthe](#) bar duo Jonny Raglin and Jeff Hollinger — is thoughtful and brainy, a quiet pragmatist in the kitchen who seems content to work behind the scenes. Espinas talked to us recently about researching turn-of-the-19th-century food traditions for Comstock, and about how a Fremont kid who once dreamed of being a journalist found himself re-inventing pork and beans for a generation brought up on [VanCamp's](#).

**SFoodie: You started out studying journalism at American University in D.C., right? How did you get from there to the kitchen?**

*Espinas:* Well, I originally went there to study international politics, but I quickly got over that love affair. I went into journalism — I enjoy the research component — and got really interested in magazine publishing. After college, I worked for some magazines. I interned for *Spin*, did some music reviews. I even ghost-wrote a real estate column for another publication!

I actually decided to move to New York after I returned to the Bay Area. But when I got there, I realized my heart wasn't in it, that there were a lot more people willing to out-hustle me for jobs. If I can't go for it in writing, I thought, what career could I try for? Restaurants was a constant theme in my life — I'd been working in cafes since I was 15, from 15 to 24.

**Where?** Noah's Bagels in Fremont, coffee shops in San Jose, I was a waiter at a Mexican restaurant. My worst job was weekend brunch host, at a brunch place that closed down in Berkeley, Café Tallulah, the place that's now [Sea Salt](#). Restaurants were something I always loved.



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Espinas at Piccino in 2008.

**How did you find your way to the back of the house?** I actually went to see a chef friend of mine in D.C., when I had this idea to go to culinary school. He was like, Yes, I believe that you can do this. I took that and ran with it, immediately moved back here to San Francisco and enrolled in CCA. At the same time I had a morning job and a night job. I started working at [Incanto](#) for my externship while I was working at night in Oakland at [À Côté](#) — that was a paying job.

**How was externing at Incanto?** Externing for [chef] [Chris \[Cosentino\]](#) was great. Chris, he's full of energy and personality, I learned a lot from working next to him. Definitely the foundation for my cooking comes from Incanto, the approach to seasonality. You learn about ingredients, and learn to build relationships with purveyors and farmers. The restaurant as a whole, it broke a lot of rules. They were the first to start the health care surcharge, the first to do filtered water — [owner] Mark Pastore and Chris were trailblazers in so many ways.

**How long were you there?** My externship was 6 months, but I stayed on for a year. Doing prep mostly, and then went on to pantry, and then pasta cook.

**What about À Côté?** I was there about 6 months — [Matt Colgan](#) was the chef. It's funny, actually: À Côté kind of informs what I'm doing now at Comstock. I loved the atmosphere, loved that the menu was diverse. You could either drop in and have a snack late at night, or have a full dinner. And also during that time I was working at [Bakesale Betty](#) — I was the first chicken fry guy. I'd go there in the morning, butcher the chickens, soak them in buttermilk, bread them, and just stand there and fry. I started a month after they opened.

**Talk about being opening chef at Piccino.** [Owners] Sher [Rogat] and Margherita [Stewart Sagan] had a specific idea of what they wanted, but the execution, filling in the details, they needed help with that. It was really great experience for me. I had a lot of ideas, and they were good at reigning them in and editing them. With Sher and Margherita it was almost like a writer-editor relationship: They'd say, 'I'm really craving this dish,' and then I'd figure out how to make it happen.

**What was it like to be running a kitchen all of a sudden?** It was a little bit intimidating. But then, the Dogpatch three years ago was a far-flung neighborhood, almost like the wild west. People didn't know what to make of us. At that time there were only 15 seats inside, and we had these high-caliber food and drinks in this little dusty corner spot. What made it easier was that people didn't go in with expectations. It was easier to make mistake, because the stakes weren't so high.

I was there for two years — I hit a ceiling a little bit, felt like I was running out of ideas. I realized I didn't have enough breadth of experience, my foundation was limited. I needed an opportunity where I could take a step back, just worry about the food and making it taste good.

**And that's when you went to Camino?** A friend of mine who worked at Piccino started there, so he got me the job. Someone once called working at Camino grad school for cooks. It's true: You work with amazing products, in an amazing kitchen that's completely unique, and you're forced to think through your personal dishes. There's a culture of prep cooks and line cooks there, everybody's rotating through all the positions. You did everything, got to see how everything worked. One day you would butcher a pig from [Riverdog Farm](#), the next day you'd be responsible for roasting it off.

**Wednesday:** In [Part 2](#), Espinas talks about researching local food traditions for Comstock.

**Thursday:** Espinas shares his recipe for Comstock's pickled eggs.