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Q & A with Comstock Saloon Chef Carlo Espinas, Part 2

By [John Birdsall, SFoodie Editor](#), Wednesday, Jun. 2 2010 @ 4:05PM



[The Yum Diary](#)

Carlo Espinas in the kitchen at Piccino.

In [Part 1](#) of our conversation with Carlo Espinas, the [Comstock Saloon](#) chef described abandoning ship on journalism to embark on a life spent in kitchen whites. Espinas, 30, got a taste of restaurant glory at [Incanto](#), witnessed the birth of the [Bakesale Betty](#) chicken sandwich, and was opening chef at [Piccino](#) before signing on for de facto cooking grad school at Oakland's [Camino](#). Comstock — a restaurant and bar rooted in San Francisco's past — has given Espinas a chance to combine the research skills he honed as a budding reporter with the cooking chops he learned in local kitchens. His sous chef is Chris Kiyuna, an old friend who's logged time at [Contigo](#) and [1300 on Fillmore](#).

Like everything else about Comstock Saloon — launched last month by mixology duo Jonny Raglin and Jeff Hollinger — the menu looks back a century or so at what the city dined on circa Great Earthquake and Fire: Anglo-American tavern food, primarily, turned distinctive via an embarrassment of prime ingredients from local ranches and truck farms.

SFoodie: So how did the Comstock gig come about?

Espinas: I was acquaintances with Jonny. He worked at Incanto before my time, and we stayed friends through the years. He approached me some months ago, not offering me the job, but just asked me as a food friend what could be done with the menu. I wrote a two-page memo or mission statement about what the food could be! He sent it around to his business partners — in some ways it helped codify what they were looking for.

Where did you go to research a menu that has to evoke 1900? I think my initial inspiration was the realization that this era was a time before widespread use of refrigeration: That meant preserved foods, pickled foods, and a lot of local foods. Things that were shipped from other regions were just dried goods or salt pork. That meant the ability to try and use preserved goods, iconic dry goods, and ingredients from Northern California. In terms of coming up with ideas for the menu, I guess the print journalism in my background really helped. I enjoyed doing the research, reading old cookbooks and practical housewife books just to get the flavor combinations, or even just the wording of items. Back then, if you look at menus, dishes had very simple names.



Snacks

Green olives.....	3.5
Fried Beans.....	3
Cheddar Crackers, pepper jelly.....	3
Pickle crock.....	4.5

Plates

Pickled eggs, rye toast, carrot sticks.....	6.5
House Salad.....	7.5
Potato fritters, spring onions, sour cream.....	8
Oyster cocktail, crackers.....	10.5
Potted pork, country ham, mustard, warm bread.....	12
Warm fishermen’s salad: asparagus, artichokes, salted fish.....	13
Crock of beans, salt pork, biscuit.....	9
Grilled game hen, oyster stuffing, greens.....	17
Beef shank and bone marrow pot-pie.....	16.5
Wild mushrooms, peas, griddled rice cakes.....	15

Dessert

Salted caramel pudding, cookie.....	5.5
Filbert cake, whipped cream.....	5.5
Confections Plate: sassafras candy, peanut brittle, chocolate fudge.....	6.5
Goat cheese, strawberry & black pepper preserves, almonds, toasts.....	6.5

What books did you use? I looked at [The Hotel St. Francis Cookbook](#) [1919] a lot. Also that [Sumptuous Dining in Gaslight San Francisco](#).

What about that, what is it, Bohemian San Francisco by Joe something? Oh, right, Joe Tilden [[Recipes for Epicures](#), 1907].

But how do you do cooking based in history without it seeming gimmicky or theme-y? As long as it's really good, then you can escape being theme-y. People don't come to eat old-time food, they come to eat good food, something that's constantly evolving with the menu. We purposely try to undersell the dishes on the [Comstock] menu. If you look at menus of that time, there were no descriptions. We're trying to play into that, and want people to be a little surprised, a little excited about what appears. We want to try to take familiar items and turn them on their head.

Like pork and beans. Pork and beans, yes. The dish is pretty exciting to me — it just sounds so plain. It's chuckwagon-style coking. But we're using organic beans (Tongue of Fire is the variety), coffee, sides of pork belly we salted ourselves, and then serving it with a little biscuit on the side.

And you're getting desserts from Luis Villavelazquez? That's right. We work together a little bit conceptualizing dishes, but they're made at Absinthe/[Arlequin](#), which is sort of a commissary kitchen these days, what with Absinthe, Arlequin, and Ferry Plaza. Luis is the hardest working guy in San Francisco restaurants.

Was it hard developing historic dishes that also pair with cocktails? Jeff and Jonny weren't really worried about doing cocktail pairings. I don't think that really works — in terms of finding proper food and drink pairings, cocktails are really tough. Our cocktails can sometimes blow out the food a little bit. Dishes that are hearty, or something fried: They go well when you're having a Manhattan or something. There are a lot of different components to this menu.

Yesterday: [Part 1](#) of our Espinas Q & A

Thursday: Carlos Espinas shares his recipe for [Comstock's pickled eggs](#)