

# Transformer

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By Naomi Wise

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## **Currant**

\*\*\*\* (Excellent)

The Sofia Hotel, 140 West Broadway (next to Greyhound terminal), downtown, 619-702-6309, [currantrestaurant.com](http://currantrestaurant.com).

**HOURS:** Lunch Monday--Friday, 11 a.m.--3:00 p.m., dinner nightly, 5:30--10:00 p.m.

**PRICES:** Dinner appetizers, \$8--\$14; entrées, \$16--\$32 (most in low \$20s); desserts, \$7--\$10.

**CUISINE AND BEVERAGES:** Intelligent, original, and even witty California-French "American brasserie" cuisine, with top-quality ingredients in a seasonally changing menu. Interesting international wines at every price point, ample choices by the glass; full bar.

**PICK HITS:** Oysters on the half-shell; foie gras; escargots; crab salad; duck leg confit; specials.

**NEED TO KNOW:** Valet parking one block west on Front Street. Cheese omelet with morel cream is currently the sole semi-vegetarian entrée, but vegetable side dishes could make a fine vegan meal.



In probably every English-speaking big city in the world, there's a Hotel Pickwick -- a quaintly faux-Victorian (yet divey) one-star habitation, usually located near a major bus or train station. San Diego's Pickwick just passed on. It was next to the Greyhound depot, but the venue has changed its name and nature: The new Sofia Hotel looks swanky, its guests more likely to be lawyers than rovers stepping off the 'Hound. Signaling the upgrade, the hotel houses a first-class but affordable new restaurant, Currant, which should prove a destination in itself. The chef, Jonathan Pflueger, has cooked at such hotsy-totsy locations as Montage Resort in Laguna Beach and New York's Russian Tea Room. He's got serious chops. (You'll find his culinary philosophy expounded on the restaurant's website, an essay nearly as long as this review and twice as earnest.) Pflueger was the chef who transformed Star of the Sea in the late '90s and later, as a consultant, turned the former Fifth and Hawthorn completely around before it reopened as Hawthorn.

The wonderful "greening" of the county's restaurants is spreading, so week after week, I find myself eating virtuous California cuisine made with seasonal locally grown produce, naturally raised meats, free-range poultry, etc. But unless the chef *does* something lively with these fine, fresh ingredients, the parade of goodness can get -- yes -- *bo*-ring. So I am overjoyed to say that Pflueger has something new to say on the plate, and a charming venue to say it in. Currant (with an *a*) is named for the fruit, but the restaurant exhibits the electricity of its homophone: current.

The decor is modern brasserie, with black-and-white tile floors, shiny black tabletops, sparkling chandeliers. It's not Art Deco but subtly hints at that style and level of sophistication. A pleasant bar is considerately situated in an adjoining room (keeping any bar noise segregated), and cool jazz plays softly on the sound system. It looks and feels like a space for grown-ups.

"What would you like?" our waiter asked as we read the menu. "Four more people to eat with us, so we could try all the appetizers," I said. The server was exemplary, a laid-back guy of a certain age, named Guy, who knew every dish on the menu and even "got it" when I specified the precise temperature I wanted the pork chop cooked to.

We began with a round of Malpeque oysters, and the departure from the ordinary began. In addition to a champagne mignonette, the bivalves were strewn with fine shreds of smoked salmon and cucumber, lending textural and flavor contrast as well as novelty. "Smart chef," I murmured.

Sturgeon gravlax (now off the menu) had a jokey quality: The austere raw sashimi-style slices, thick, with a steaklike texture, were surrounded by soft, comforting pumpkin waffles -- like a Zen monk wearing a fluffy orange sweater.

A zesty jumbo lump blue-crab salad was topped with a caraway cracker that resembled a sturdy potato chip, to serve as a platform for a slaw of apple, fennel, and celery root. A touch of curry oil lent a spicy undertone to the crab. All the elements harmonized.

Best of all were two specials, one of which has already made it onto the regular menu, while the other is under consideration. (Our good Guy informed us of the prices as he described them, as

too few waiters do.) Foie gras with black Mission figs was exquisite, the liver cooked à point, and a good-sized piece of it, too. Even better was a clever rethinking of escargots. "I love foie gras the best of anything," said one of my tablemates, "but [here] I actually love the escargots more." The snails, free from their shells, mingled with a creamy, garlicky mushroom sauce that included whole chanterelles spread over sensuous soft polenta, with a pile of fine-minced parsley on the side. The combination included all the elements of classic Burgundian garlic-parsley butter, but with other rich flavors added to the conversation -- a convivial snail cocktail party.

There were at least four more appetizers we wanted to try (but then we'd have had to skip entrées), including a charcuterie sampler with house-made bresaola, duck prosciutto, and pork pâté. In the future, the chef plans to make cheeses in-house to amend this assortment. There's also a heritage-beet salad paired -- not with the standard (yawn) chèvre -- but with a melted-leek tart. A parsnip soup and steamed mussels with *frites* didn't sound too shabby either. (I'll leave the ahi tartare and Caesar salad to those who want the same dishes at every restaurant they go to.)

Our entrées weren't quite up to the starters. Oddly, three out of four choices revealed near-monochromatic color schemes, as though filmed in the sepia of an old-time movie. In an entrée of jumbo scallops, the thick orbs were lightly seared (barely browned, their centers translucent) and came with white truffle risotto, caramelized onion juice, and fried Maui-onion rings. I didn't really love this combination, but I respected it. I might have enjoyed it more if anything on the plate were a color other than beige-to-tan; my taste buds as well as my eyes craved something green and fresh. A thick chipotle-barbecued pork chop (cooked to 135° Fahrenheit, just as I specified) was smoky not just from the sauce, but all through the meat. It had been cold-smoked in the kitchen, coming by its "barbecue" designation honestly. The chop was gorgeously, tragically fatty around the edges and tender all the way through. Its companions were satisfying Tuscan-style white beans and, in a break from sepia, a wee bit o' the green, in a heaplet of arugula.

Muscovy duck leg confit was the essence of "confit food," the meat (served on the bone) shreddy and crisp-surfaced, accompanied by French lentils *de puy*, speckled with tiny carrot bits. Alongside came two baguette crostini coated with chèvre and currant jam -- that is, open-face cream cheese and jelly sandwiches! The pairing was surprisingly apt, lightening up (in all ways) a heavy, serious dish. The white cheese and purplish jam also gave the eye bright relief from another sea of brown.

We all felt that the slow-braised veal cheeks could have used another hour or so of slow-braising to turn them to proper Gallic meat-mush. The flavors were rich and winey, but the texture was rather tough. Here the color scheme was mahogany brown and beige. But who could say a word against the mixture of multicolored fingerling potatoes, tender caramelized salsify ("oyster plant"), and baby artichokes? One of the best features of Currant is the loving, individualized treatment of vegetables. Not just cooked and slapped on the plate, they are *cherished*. I suspect that even strict vegans could get glorious meals here, drawing from the side dishes and accompaniments.

The staff includes a pastry chef, so all desserts are house-made, including ice creams. The choices sound enticing, but those we tasted proved a bit less than enchanting. The Grand Marnier

soufflé (order in advance) started well but grew eggy and dense as we reached the bottom. The banana strudel in Moroccan "brik" pastry (similar to filo) looked like an egg roll and promised cardamom flavoring in the caramel. We couldn't taste the spice -- the coarse sweetness of mashed bananas eclipsed all else. But the house-made crème fraîche gelato on the side was exquisite. Port-braised pear ice cream was lovely but would be even better surrounded by slices of Port-braised pears to reemphasize the basis of its bashful flavor. Still, I'd love to go back and sample the currant bread pudding, tarte tatin, chestnut crème brûlée, pumpkin cheesecake, and profiteroles with espresso ice cream. So many temptations, and surely one or more must be triumphs. And there are several alluring cheese platters as well.

Best of all, perhaps, are the prices for this inventive, distinctively personal cuisine. While not exactly cheap eats, they're in line with other upscale neighborhood restaurants like Avenue 5 and Bleu Bohème, but the cooking is at a higher level of skill and imagination. The wine list is laden with reasonably priced bottles from underappreciated growing regions (plus a few high-end superstars), so whatever your tastes or budget, you'll find an appropriate quaff. Our bill for four diners in shameless-indulgence mode was fully \$100 *less* than at Anthology or Sushi Ota (well, the *sensei* has expensive tastes in sake). But even if you can't handle shameless indulgence, you can make a superb meal of two courses of exciting appetizers with food costs of about \$25 a person. Our Guy won't mind -- he hinted that we should consider doing just that. Whichever way you go, one thing's likely: You won't be bored.

## **ABOUT THE CHEF**

"I grew up with my father, so out of necessity I learned how to cook. I took great interest in it, and it was always my summer job," says Jonathan Pflueger, who hails from Laguna Beach. "I started as a dishwasher, became a prep cook, and then a seafood cook at a little Mexican restaurant. I never really thought of it as a profession, and I ended up going to Vassar College and graduated with a degree in Third World history. I was planning to go to law school after that, but I needed to pay off some serious student loans, and I got lucky and worked my way into a great French restaurant called L'Etoile in Madison, Wisconsin. That was about 20 years ago. Until then, I'd always been a short-order cook, and this just opened a whole new world of flavors and products to use. At that point, I realized that this was what I really wanted to do.

"I never went to culinary school, but from that point on I worked and learned as much as I could in each kitchen, and as soon as it became a production job I'd move on. I sought out the best kitchens and best chefs from whom I could learn, and that was my education for the first ten years, until I finally had my first opportunity as an executive chef, with the Ritz Carlton in Laguna Niguel, as chef of the dining room. Then I came to San Diego and was offered a position running Anthony's flagship, Star of the Sea. I was there for six years, but then I was offered the chance to go back to New York as the re-opening chef for the Russian Tea Room in New York City." (Pflueger served as executive sous-chef at showman Warner LeRoy's zillion-dollar refurbishment of the Tea Room into a fantasy Czarist palace, with a French-Russian menu. The food was roundly panned by the *New York Times* and other media.) "It was quite an experience. It was such a unique opportunity. Myself and one of my mentors, Fabrice Canelle, the executive chef, we had a test kitchen at Tavern on the Green for six months prior to the opening. We had Russian food consultants come in. Once the place opened, we had four floors of dining, 88

cooks. We communicated through walkie-talkies. We'd make an 800-gallon batch of borscht every day. It was amazing. It was more about the theater of the place than about the food.

"After two years, I wanted to be in an atmosphere that was a little more intimate and food-driven than the Tea Room, and I came back as the chef de cuisine for a French bistro in Newport Beach, and from there I got an opportunity to open my own restaurant in Laguna. It was called Vertical, and it was a tapas and wine bar -- it was all tasting plates and fun wine flights. We were open for two years before I left to become the opening executive chef at Montage Resort, which offered me a lot more money than we were making.

"Montage was an unbelievable resort, but I was an executive chef and we had three restaurants that all had very talented chefs de cuisine, so my position was more about managing managers and crunching numbers. It did give me the opportunity to do *stages* in France with George Blanc and Paul Bocuse...But what got me into this business was my love of food and cooking, and I didn't quite have those avenues there...I started teaching at Laguna Culinary Academy and doing some consulting work. Through that consulting work, I ended up meeting the owners of the Sofia Hotel. I started out as a consultant here, but as our relationship grew they just decided, 'Hey, let's do this together.' And it came to fruition when we opened Currant on September 1. I'd fallen in love with San Diego when I was here before, and my daughters love living here, and I'm here to stay.

"As I wrote on the website, my mantra is: No food is fearful except if it isn't fresh, and no meal is to be feared as long as it's in balance. The stars of our plate are the raw products. We put a lot of time into getting the best from our fishmongers, our small-farm purveyors. We're really product-driven. Our intention is to treat the food with respect, and simply, and let the natural flavors come out, while we come out with unique flavor combinations. And a lot of the staff here were with me at Star of the Sea and have real enthusiasm and a strong work ethic; it's a pleasure to work with them again."

**Naomi Wise**