

# Laying Down the Dining Law

*Church & State Reserves the Right to Serve Everybody*

*Written by Joshua Lurie*



Restaurateur Steven Arroyo always hated restaurant signs that read, "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone." With concepts like Cobras & Matadors, he's made an effort to be all-inclusive. Now he's hoping his democratic approach translates downtown. On September 22, Arroyo and Yassminn Surmati opened Church & State, a working-class brasserie that occupies a former Biscuit Company Lofts loading dock.

The historic building, which dates back to 1925, resides on the southern fringes of the downtown Arts District. Arroyo worked with architect David Wick to mold the former headquarters of the National Biscuit Company. A glass facade allows for theatrical 180-degree views of the stainless steel exhibition kitchen. There's an L-shaped marble bar. Brick floors extend from the tiled-over dock, beyond the plant-lined patio to Industrial Street. Overhead, the dining room is strung with clear light bulbs that cast a soft glow at night.

At lunch, businesspeople descend on Church & State from the Fashion District, Financial District and surrounding neighborhoods. At night, the brasserie is popular with downtown denizens, including local artists and musicians. Chef Greg Bernhardt lives in the area, so he's been able to draw in neighbors. He's also developed a following with chef friends.

Bernhardt previously cooked for Arroyo at 750 ml in South Pasadena, where he changed the menu almost daily, depending on market finds. At Church & State, he and Arroyo are focused on consistency. Expect a roster of enduring French classics,

including onion soup, escargots with garlic and parsley, steak tartare, duck confit, mussels Provençale, charcuterie, steak frites and cassoulet. Bernhardt worked hard to lighten up the dishes for Southern California palates without sacrificing integrity.

But the fact that Church & State has a consistent menu doesn't mean that Bernhardt has sacrificed freshness. He sources most ingredients from within eight blocks of the restaurant, relying on the downtown produce and fish markets. He also offers daily specials based upon what's in season.

Bernhardt also bakes the desserts. Right now, he's featuring blanchmange — France's answer to the panna cotta, consisting of roasted almonds suspended with gelatin and served with farmers' market berries. The other two options are soufflé with coffee anglaise and tarte tatin, alternating between Comice pears and pink lady apples.

Bill Fernandez wrote the wine lists at Cobras & Matadors and 750 ml and has constructed a 40-bottle list that's 100 percent French. Selections are strong on Burgundy and Bordeaux, including 12 options by the glass and half-glass. No bottle's price tag tops triple digits.

Arroyo plans to roll out Sunday brunch and eventually offer a casual breakfast of pastries, coffee and omelets. "We want our customers to know they can count on us every day of the week for the next 25 or 30 years," he says.

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