



the
Temple
that **Prana**
built

A nightclub/restaurant hybrid pushes the outer limits of green

by Alastair Bland



A quick study of Prana's menu reveals elements of Mediterranean, European, and Californian cuisines melding with the spices and herbs of Eastern curry country. "Fusion" might have been an apt label several years ago, when the term still suggested food at the cutting edge of progressive dining, but not today, and not at Prana. This surreal SoMa restaurant bears a vast and visionary confluence of energies that swirl together creating a restaurant and dance club that takes diners far beyond food—catering to the fancies of San Francisco's edgiest night-lifers and defying industry standards.

"This space is an incubator of ideas," Owner Paul Hemming, who brainstormed the concept several years ago, explains. "It's nourishment

have lecturers, and in the late-night hours the space serves as a dance floor, though the main nightclub, called Temple, dwells underground. To get there, one descends a stunning stairwell, dressed up with Mayan-sci-fi décor and wall patterns. It leads like a portal to a moody cave, flanked by a bar, walled with stone, and subdued by a low, shadowy ceiling. In the next chamber, the outlook changes dramatically. White, slick, and clean as a spaceship, this room is an unmistakable nod to the filmscapes of Stanley Kubrick, perfectly mimicking the final scene of *2001: A Space Odyssey* with a spooky familiarity.

But during daylight hours in the main dining room the down-to-earth servers, the local workforce on lunch break, and the aromas of Asian herbs and

"It's nourishment for the mind,
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—Paul Hemming

for the mind, body, and soul. It fuses all the things and passions I grew up with: music, art, culture, sustainability, and food."

A 34-year-old longtime local, Hemming was studying film at San Francisco State University when a house fire in 1998 destroyed all his work and equipment. Then he shifted his attention to the music business, running that quaint thing of the past called a record store. When that folded, Hemming took a breather for several years, accumulating inspiration and ideas, and in 2007 he channeled all his interests—ranging from food to religion to sci-fi—and let go a flood of creativity. As the waters subsided, Prana emerged.

In the ground-level dining room, industrial décor creates a bold backdrop for a selection of Asian artifacts on display. Several terraced levels of seating provide views across the room and of the deejay stage in back. Hiding upstairs: a yoga lounge, a film-editing office, and a recording studio. Political campaigners have used the restaurant to hold private events, as

sizzling meats assure us that we haven't slipped into a wormhole. Lunch, served daily, is the main dining draw at Prana, while dinner comes Thursday through Saturday, often as a prelude for guests eager for the lights to go down and the beats to begin. In the kitchen, there is no executive chef, yet the cuisine is highly compelling. It's built upon organic ingredients and "superfoods," with most dishes featuring some blend of avocado, whole grains, figs, nuts, tropical fruits, and organic meats.

The assembly makes for brilliantly colored meals, given further life by subtropical spices. Among the most popular dishes on the menu is the Tandoori Chicken Burrito, a whole-wheat wrap filled with saffron rice, daal, queso fresco, and avocado. Another enticing item is a chopped vegetable salad of greens, bleu cheese, avocado, jicama, and a sumac-lime yogurt dressing. The Thai Vegetable Curry, Spicy Tuna Tartare, and Saag Paneer Ravioli are other popular entrées that embody the "global-hybrid" culinary theme, as Hemming prefers to call it. Fruit and vegetable juices serve as invigorating pick-me-ups, in case the kaleidoscope list of organic cocktails is a bit too dizzying.

Hemming acknowledges that “nightclubs can be symbols of excess and debauchery,” but the yin-yang partnership of Prana and Temple are built upon a goal of sustainability. This begins in the kitchen, where produce is mostly organic and roughly 90-percent of all waste is recycled or composted. In the works for the rooftop is a garden of herbs and vegetables to supply ingredients for the chefs and to provide forage for wild pollinators. Also on the roof, solar panels will be installed to help offset the energy demands of the compound below. Installation of small wind turbines is also on the agenda.

Most innovative of Prana’s energy-inducing efforts is Hemming’s firm plan to install piezoelectric tiling on the dining room floor. This brand new technology, developed by an American tech company called POWERleap, draws energy through footsteps, and after 10pm, when the tables and chairs are cleared to make way for the 1,200 guests who often pass through Prana on a Saturday night, the vibrating floor tiles could generate enough power to help take Prana completely off the grid. Prana, in fact, means “life force” in Sanskrit, and the energy here is truly electrifying.

During meal hours, however, trays of hot entrées, empty plates, and wine glasses float swiftly over the dining room floor much like they would in a more ordinary restaurant, and all the futurismo, electronica, and surrealism that dwells within the walls keep a quiet and well-mannered presence. After dinnertime, however, the deliciousness takes a decidedly livelier turn as revelers discover that living life to its fullest can be done responsibly after all. 

