

(Written for *Culinary Trends Magazine*)

FARALLON

San Francisco's Onshore Feeding Frenzy

by
Kathy Steligo

In San Francisco, where dining is revered as an art form, new restaurants come and go as frequently as fog sliding through the Golden Gate. Farallon, the city's newest seafood experience, is a recent exception. The downtown restaurant's sophisticated menu and fanciful underwater interior is making fans of the city's most demanding diners. Named for a group of small offshore islands, Farallon is the creation of designer Pat Kuleto and chef Mark Franz, two of San Francisco's best culinary stars.

Kuleto is renowned for his unique restaurant interiors, including San Francisco's Boulevard and Postrio, Atlanta's Buckhead Diner, and the Silverbullet Diner in Tokyo. A San Francisco native and third-generation restaurateur, Franz made a big splash, particularly with his charcuterie, during his decade as executive chef at Stars. He was feeling a bit of "been there, done that," when Kuleto suggested they collaborate on a spectacular, one-of-a-kind seafood restaurant. The theme was a logical choice, since both men sail, fish and share a long-time love of the sea. "The timing was right," remembers Franz. "I was looking for something new and exciting, something that would stretch and challenge my skills."

The initial challenge for Franz was establishing Farallon's menu. "From my perspective, that was the most difficult work," he recalls. "I wanted something fresh, original and sophisticated to match the atmosphere of the dining room." That was easier said than done, since the master drawings were locked safely away in Kuleto's fertile mind. "Pat and I would meet with artists and craftspeople, explain our ideas and off they would go to create. A few weeks later, we would receive a mock-up of the design. We'd send them back to make changes, and they would return in a few days with more revisions," says Franz. "We were shooting from the hip but Pat knew exactly what he wanted."

Kuleto—who happens to be a Pisces—commissioned artisans from all over the country to transform a 1924 Elks Club into an opulent sea grotto. Over a three-year period, virtually all of Farallon's \$4 million interior was custom-designed, including artwork, hardware, lighting and fabric. Once inside the restaurant, busy city streets give way to the cool ambience of an underwater world Captain Nemo would envy. With a combined seating capacity of 160, each of three eating areas features its own sea fantasy motif. Embossed shells and starfish waft across sand-colored walls. Simulated barnacles and kelp strands twine around wall scones and illuminated coral-hued columns. Tentacles trailing, ten giant hand-blown jellyfish chandeliers float above a 25-foot bar of Indian marble, where patrons perch atop iron-tentacled stools. A curving staircase of "caviar"—fifty thousand iridescent blue marbles—leads to the mezzanine

bar, where an inky blue ceiling simulates an evening sky at sea. In the cave-like space of the main dining room, sea urchin chandeliers hang from the restored hand-painted mosaic ceiling. Low lighting and rich fabrics accent Farallon's underwater mood and fantasy. Franz's magic in the kitchen, however, is the bait that reels diners in again and again. His innovative menu includes bounty from local coastal waters and surprises from exotic seas.

A master at balancing bold flavors and dramatic presentations, Franz often combines fish, prawns, scallops, lobsters or crabs with unusual ingredients and spectacular sauces. He sets fresh peeky toe crab in a Santa Barbara sea urchin sauce, and anoints yellowtail carpaccio with black truffle-ginger essence. To make his ginger-scented "pillows," Franz sandwiches wild salmon and sea scallops between dollops of prawn mousse, then wraps the mixture into overlapping leaves of Napa cabbage. The entire package is then steamed, and served on gingered vegetable dice with foie gras sauce. Dungeness crab, another local favorite, is lightly steamed and presented with truffled peas, then presented in a sea urchin shell.

Farallon's signature dish, the Prawn, Lobster and Scallop Pyramid, is an example of Franz' fondness for labor-intensive dishes. "I love to create dishes that really take a lot of time and work, like terrines and molds," says Franz. Sitting in a brilliant pool of saffron essence and sprinkled with salmon caviar, his pyramid of shellfish aspic holds chunks of shrimp, scallops and lobster. Franz creates housemade caviar, another of Farallon's most requested dishes, from fresh sturgeon and steelhead salmon eggs. "Making the caviar is relatively easy," says Franz. "Finding the eggs is another story. Based on our growing demand for the caviar, our suppliers are now providing us with eggs that would otherwise be exported to Asian markets."

Chef Franz revises his menu every week or so to highlight the freshest seafood available. "I focus on creating new tastes with the freshest ingredients," says Franz. "I don't really pay attention to what everyone else is doing. And I'm not particularly concerned with what's hot or trendy. That way I don't get locked into any preconceived notions."

The commitment to excellence reflected in Farallon's design and menu is evident in every other facet of the restaurant. Emily Luchetti, widely acknowledged as one of the best pastry chefs in the country, provides unpretentious desserts. A knowledgeable, friendly waitstaff helps with the menu and the 300-item wine list that features a generous selection of by-the-glass servings. Franz credits the entire staff for maintaining Farallon's stylish standards. "I've concerned myself more with building a good team than equipping a fancy kitchen with expensive gadgets," he says. "The team concept is important; I believe in empowering people." His co-workers at Stars apparently appreciated that philosophy; many of them, including Luchetti, followed Franz to Farallon.

A hit since it first opened in June 1997, Farallon has already been recognized by *Esquire* and *Bon Appetit* as one of the country's top restaurants. Did Franz anticipate the overwhelming success of Farallon? "I wanted to make a splash, but I didn't realize we would get quite so much attention!" he laughs. "I've just never taken myself too seriously."