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TOP 100 RECIPE



Tina Case / Special to The Chronicle; photographed at Riggs Distributing, Inc., Burlingame, Sub-Zero and Wolf Appliances

Chef Michael Tusk of Quince and Cotogna restaurants adds a dash of salt to pea risotto with pureed and whole peas and pea stock.

Under the spell of maestro Tusk

By Jessica Battilana

If you've lived in the Bay Area long enough, you might remember Quince's early, earnest beginnings a dozen years ago and the restaurant's original jewel-box space (now home to Octavia), where the husband-and-wife team of Michael and Lindsay Tusk stepped out on their own.

And if you write about food in a town for long enough, as I have, you end up bearing witness to many failures and restaurant closures — not every place or chef can be great. But every once in a while you get to witness the spectacular ascent of a talented chef and his team, watching them grow and improve with every passing year.

In 2009, the Tusks relocated the restaurant to their current larger, sleeker Jackson Square space, closing for a few months last year to renovate it even further.

The move, and the opening of their second restaurant, Cotogna, next door, has allowed Michael Tusk to evolve as a chef, expressing two distinct styles — of food and service — in two excellent restaurants.

At Quince, guests settle in for the full fine-dining experience, which has earned the restaurant two stars from Michelin and four stars from Michael Bauer, in addition to a place on the Top 100 Bay Area Restaurants guide.

At Cotogna, which also made the Top 100, the menu is rustic Italian, including wood-grilled meats and Tusk's superlative pasta. It may be more casual, but it's no less rigorous.

What unites the two restaurants is the Tusks' singular focus on excellence, whether guests are having a four-course meal in the Quince dining room or a

pizza at the Cotogna counter. Cooks who have worked with the Tusks talk about them with a mixture of reverence, awe and fear; greatness suffers no fools.

Watching Michael Tusk cook pea risotto reveals his exacting nature. He first makes a light stock using the pea pods, then an electric-green puree of blanched peas. He

melts butter in a saucepan, adds minced onion and carnaroli rice, then sets the time on his iPhone, confidently assuring me it will take 15 minutes until it reaches creamy perfection.

When the timer rings, he brings a spoonful of risotto to his mouth, testing the rice grains for doneness, then vigorously whisks in the mantecato (Italian

for creamy) — a finishing combination of grated Parmigiano-Reggiano and butter. He swirls in the pea puree, then divides the risotto among four plates, instructing me that it should look "like a wave" on the plate.

He's spent the last 20 minutes in a trance-like state, intensely focused on making a textbook risotto. It's only after a bowl of it is in my hand that he cracks a sly smile.

"It's pretty good, right?" he asks. I take a spoonful. As has happened often over the years during meals at Quince and Cotogna, I fall under Tusk's spell.

Quince: 470 Pacific Ave., San Francisco; (415) 775-8500. www.quincerestaurant.com. Dinner Monday-Saturday.

Cotogna: 490 Pacific Ave., San Francisco; (415) 775-8508. www.cotognasf.com. Lunch or brunch and dinner Monday-Saturday; fixed-price family-style dinner Sunday.

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Watch the video

See how Michael Tusk prepares his risotto: <http://bit.ly/1FSAanl>

Michael Tusk's English Pea Risotto

Serves 4

To make his spring risotto, Michael Tusk of Quince and Cotogna uses every part of the pea — the pods go into a light pea stalk, the blanched peas become a brilliant green puree, and the flowers and shoots become a lovely garnish.



- 3 pounds English peas**
- 2 quarts water**
- 2 shallots, peeled and halved**
- ½ cup sliced carrots**
- ½ cup sliced fennel**
- 1 cup mint sprigs**
- 1 bay leaf**
- 10 tablespoons unsalted butter**
- 1 cup carnaroli rice, Acquerello brand preferred**
- ¾ cup white wine**
- ½ cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano**
- Kosher salt**
- Fresh lemon juice**
- 1 cup pea shoots, for garnish**
- ¼ cup pea flowers, for garnish**
- ½ cup mixed fresh chervil, mint and tarragon, for garnish**

Instructions: Shuck the peas, reserving the peas and pods. Rinse the pods under cold water and place in a large saucepan. Add the water, shallots, carrots, fennel, mint and bay. Bring to a simmer, then remove from the heat and cover the pan with plastic wrap. Let stand for 40 minutes, then strain through a fine-mesh sieve into a clean saucepan. Discard the solids.

Heat the pea stock over medium heat. Meanwhile, prepare an ice bath. When the stock is boiling, add the reserved peas and cook for 1 minute, just until tender. With a sieve or spider, transfer the peas to the ice bath to stop the cooking and set the brilliant green color. Once cool, drain and transfer to a bowl. Keep the

stock on the burner over low heat.

Put a quarter of the blanched peas into a blender, reserving the remaining whole peas. Add a small amount of pea stock to the blender, just enough to make the blending easier, and blend until smooth. Transfer the pea puree to a bowl and set aside.

In a 1-quart sauce pan over medium-low heat, add 2 tablespoons of the butter. When the butter is melted, add the rice and toast gently, stirring, for about 4 minutes, until the rice is evenly coated with butter and evenly toasted. Add the white wine and cook until all the wine has evaporated.

Set a timer for 16 minutes. Add a ladleful of the warm pea stock to the rice, enough to just cover. Cook, stirring, until the stock has been fully absorbed, then add another ladleful of stock. Continue this process, adding more stock as needed. When the risotto has cooked for 15 minutes, taste it; the rice should be cooked through but not mushy. If the rice is not done, cook it a minute or two longer.

When the rice is done, turn off the heat and let rest for 30 seconds. Add ¼ cup of the pea puree, the Parmigiano, the remaining 8 tablespoons butter and the reserved (whole, blanched) English peas. Stir vigorously and taste. Season to taste with a little salt and add a squeeze of lemon juice.

Divide the risotto among 4 warmed plates and garnish each serving with some of the pea flowers, shoots and herbs. Serve immediately.

Per serving: 615 calories, 15 g protein, 57 g carbohydrates, 33 g fat (21 g saturated), 88 mg cholesterol, 244 mg sodium, 6 g fiber.