

# FOOD &

# Breads of heaven

By Paul Reidinger

In this land of milk and honey and boutique bread, nobody bakes better breads than Pascal Rigo's Bay Bread. Amid a welter of formidable contenders — Acme, Grace, and Semifreddi's, just to name a few — Bay Bread's loaves often seem to have that extra touch of (pardon my French) *je ne sais quoi*: a crustier crust, a richer scent, a deeper texture? Perhaps their advantage is due in part to the fact that they aren't as widely distributed; whereas many artisanal breads have found their way onto supermarket shelves in the past decade, Bay Bread's breads are a bit harder to find. They turn up at Rigo's boulangeries, of course (on Polk and Cole), and in his impressive array of restaurants, among them Cortez and Le Petit Robert.

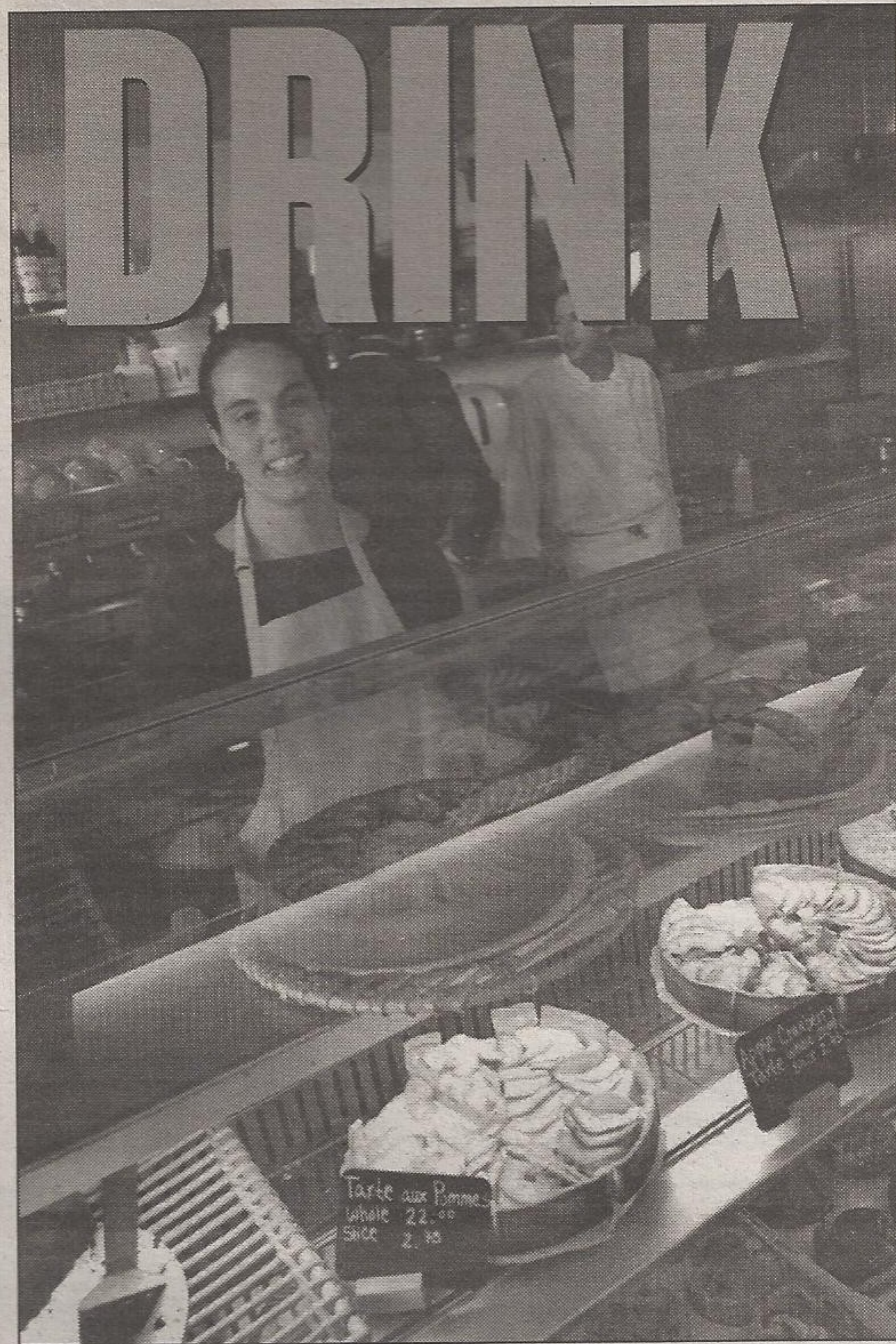
A paradox of Rigo's restaurants is that the excellence of the bread is often peripheral. You're brought a basket when you're seated, but the main line of the menu at places like Cortez and Le Petit Robert is not bread-driven. The boulangeries, on the other hand, do offer prepared food in addition to bread loaves, cakes, tarts, and pastries, but the thrust is sandwiches. Sandwiches are fine and splendid, but they do imply certain limits too. What we have here, then, is an inviting interstice — the gap between bakery and restaurant — and Rigo has now cleverly filled it with Rigolo, a café with limited (though highly efficient) table service and a yeast-oriented menu of sandwiches, salads, and pizzas, with a few weightier, less-bready items added for dinner.

The restaurant's location, in the Laurel Village shopping center, is about as transportation-friendly as can be, with an endless parade of trolleys calling on the California Street side and a huge parking lot behind. (The

latter looks like the bunny-hill equivalent of one of those test courses for Land Rovers.) The site also reaffirms Rigo's commitment to the neighborhood; his ill-starred La Table opened and closed not long ago just a block away, on Sacramento. But Rigolo isn't meant to take La Table's place; the latter, with its banquettes upholstered in gorgeous striped French fabrics and its secret dining room like a sound stage, spoke in the breezy tones of casual, moneyed style, while Rigolo, with its bustle and bright lights and exposed rafters and clattery bonhomie, is like a cross between a French-accented Boston Market and a ski lodge, though one in the midst of a snowless city.

I mention Boston Market because one of the livelier dinner items is half an herbed, roasted chicken (\$13.95), which we found to be quite meaty despite its petiteness (was it a poussin?). The flesh was moist under crispy-gold skin and was served with a ramekin of garlic jus and a pile of bronze, slightly undersalted frites. It was better than the roast chickens I've had in quite a few grander restaurants, though nearly as expensive, it must be added.

Still, even at dinner it's hard to escape Rigolo's realm of yeast. We often like to split a pizza as a starter, and we very much liked the rectangular fresh-tomato pie (\$8.95, with goat cheese); we hacked it to bits like axe murderers, trying to make sure the crumbly bits of *chèvre* were equitably apportioned. And as a sometime baker of brioche (the bread that thinks it's a cake), I was entranced with the tuna melt on brioche (\$7.95), though truth to tell, the tuna salad was more or less a condiment in support of the thick, crisp-spongy slices of bread. (The Gruyère-ish mac



GUARDIAN PHOTO BY ROBY MCNAMARA

The art of the *tarte*: The glass case at Rigolo is full of tasty sweets — and the savories aren't bad, either.

and cheese on the side needed a bit of resuscitative work with the salt shaker but did come satisfyingly alive once that work was complete.)

Not all Rigolo's sandwiches are built on brioche, but for the most part they are built on some sort of interesting bread. An open-faced spicy chicken number (\$7.95), for instance, took shape by stacking shreds of boneless roasted chicken breast on a platform of levain (made with organic flour), then dotting it with rounds of pickled jalapeño pepper and dabs of chipotle aioli before melting a sheet of cheddar cheese over the top. And bocadillos (\$6.95 for two) consisted in stuffing hamburger-bun slices of olive bread with, in one instance, prosciutto and frisée and, in the other, Manchego cheese and fig jam.

Baking isn't all about bread, of course, or even yeast. We mustn't forget dessert, whose possibilities are well represented in the glass case at the

cashier's stand (where you order, pay, and take custody of a little numbered flag on a little flagpole that tells the service staff where to deliver things). Our dealings in this area were limited to a chocolate-caramel *tarte* (\$3), a chocolate pastry shell the size of a small fist, filled with chocolate and caramel goos. The goos were delicious, but the crust determinedly resisted being cut, even by a steak knife. Twice the *tarte* flew across the table like a hockey puck from our efforts to slice it; could this toughness have reflected the difference between something made to order and something that had been sitting there for a while? My kingdom for a brioche ... ❖

**Rigolo.** 3465 California (at Laurel), S.F. (415) 876-7777, [www.rigolocafe.com](http://www.rigolocafe.com). Mon.–Sat., 7 a.m.–9 p.m.; Sun., 8 a.m.–9 p.m. Beer and wine. MasterCard, Visa. Somewhat noisy. Wheelchair accessible.