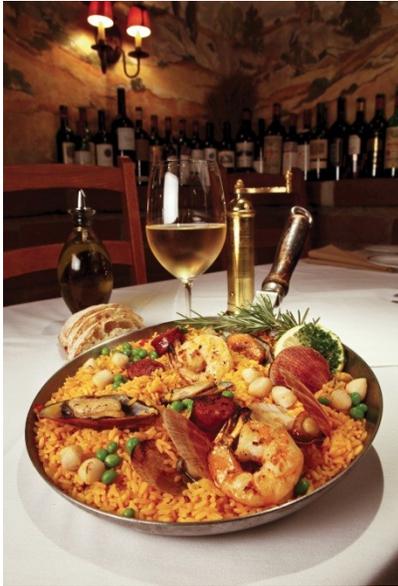


Table for Two: Fandango meshes romance, comfort food

Mediterranean cuisine served in rustic venue that hides seven intimate dining rooms



Pierre Bain lives in a throwaway society, yet he loves tradition, honors commitment and embraces perseverance. So when he falls in love — with a person, an idea or an institution — it's for keeps.

The love of his life for the last 33 years is his wife Marietta. Running a close second is their restaurant, Fandango in Pacific Grove, a place the couple has doted on daily for the last 22 years. "It's the reason we get up in the morning," says Pierre. "That, and each other." In the late 1980s Pierre was a manager at the prestigious Club XIX in Pebble Beach and a frequent customer at Fandango, then owned by the Georis family. Pierre loved his time dining at Fandango so much that he bought the restaurant. Pierre was born for it. His family has run the Grand Hotel Bain in the village of Comps-sur-Artuby in the South of France for the last 250 years (and that's no misprint). Fandango's menus feature old family photos depicting centuries of hospitality and the magic created through comfort food, gracious service and quality wine. Pierre learned the business working with his siblings and relatives at the hotel's restaurant. "We are a foodie family through and through," says Pierre. This labor of love has paid dividends as locals invariably name Fandango as their favorite destination restaurant when searching for a romantic evening out. The menu features a broad brushstroke through Europe, with Basque, French, Spanish, Italian and North

African influences. Expect to find everything from steak frites, veal piccata and paella — much of the food cooked over a wood-burning grill, and supervised by longtime executive chef Pedro De La Cruz. From the beginning, Pierre's idea was to return to basics. "We wanted to serve comfort food," he says. "It's a pleasure for me to do exactly what I was meant to do." HE SAID I had quibbles with Fandango, but its sheer romance and a stellar entrée easily pushed them into the far recesses of my addled brain turned to a gooey mush in this warm, comforting, convivial restaurant. If I retrieve these nitpicks, they center mostly around a too-eager service and a tome-like wine list that, despite its awards, leaves us by-the-glass connoisseurs with limited options (house wines only). Oh, and if you're the one stuck with the bill, it can cause spontaneous hyperventilation. Home of what I believe to be the Peninsula's most expensive burger (\$14.95, with fries) and a market-price foie gras terrine that checked in at \$28 that day, Fandango is not for the budget-minded, unless a special occasion calls. But damn the food's good. The melon and prosciutto, normally a mundane dish, was a perfect starter; the melon dead ripe and sweet and the prosciutto only the best, imported from Parma, Italy. And the couscous lamb shank Algerois could be the best entrée of the year for me. Aggressively seasoned and braised to perfection, the lamb announced its arrival a few seconds before appearing, its perfume filling the tiny three-table, romantic nook we took up temporary residence in. This entrée came split between two vessels, the first shallow bowl holding the broth, shank and large chunks of squash and carrot; the second a plate of couscous and chickpeas. The all-important condiments included toasted almond slices, plump, reconstituted raisins and a tube of harissa, the ketchup of the Mediterranean and Middle East made with piri piri chile peppers, tomatoes and paprika. I assemble bites as I go, ladling broth and bits of tender lamb over the absorbent couscous, sprinkling condiments over top and applying liberal amounts of harissa in scattershot bursts. It was sheer pleasure that lifted all my senses, and almost made me forget that we paid \$28 for a sliver of foie gras terrine (with veins of black truffle and rimmed with a decadent gelee ring). It's exquisite, but \$10 too much, in my opinion. Servers move about unobtrusively, but attempt to clear plates too soon. One polite gentleman asks twice if we had finished our tapas, and we answer no. A moment later he whizzes by and snatches it away; efficiency can come dangerously close to pushiness. In my world, though, it barely mattered. Flavor and romance always come first. SHE SAID I'm pretty sure tourists arrive to the Peninsula with Fandango dog-eared in their travel guides. And I know many locals who name Fandango among the best restaurants in the area. One thing's for sure: This is a nice place to spend an

evening, especially with the one you love. The utter snob in me never likes traipsing through a parking lot on my way into a restaurant. But here, large window boxes trailing with geraniums point guests in the right direction, where you soon find a stone entryway filled with pots of flowers, and a polite maitre d' who seems to have been anticipating your arrival — even if you don't have a reservation (but I advise making one). "Darling" is the appropriate word for the ambience here. It's like visiting a rustic French farmhouse with old wood floors, fairy lights, quaint paintings and an adobe ceiling with bits of straw sticking out. And you have the feeling it's someone's home (it was, in fact), and you've been invited for dinner. Several separate rooms allow for private conversation, and personal touches, such as eclectic collections inside old hutches and fresh flowers on every table, suggest a special attention to detail. It's quite romantic, really — perhaps at the top of my list. The country-style housemade pate on the tapas plate and the terrine of foie gras (its startling price point notwithstanding) are each satiny and sinful. We almost slap our server's hand when he attempts to take the plate away before we've managed to ... lick it. I also love the small mound of delicate celery root "slaw" in that appetizer, and a small portion of elegant marinated white beans. Caesar salad is forgettable, and a bit odd with the addition of shredded Gruyere and the absence of a true, tangy, anchovy-spiked dressing (\$8.95). The cassoulet makes an outstanding presentation — in a steaming earthenware bowl (\$25.95). Hunks of duck accompany large sausage rounds in a rich stew of white beans. It's rustic, comforting and quite wonderful. Dining in this charming room with us are an older couple, who agonize dramatically over the extensive wine list (California or France?). They give a wine recommendation to a second couple. And somewhere during this exchange, it dons on me what a shameless eavesdropper I've become. Still, on the way out, I resist the urge to recommend that cassoulet. I guess recommending your experience even before you leave the place is a good sign. Mike Hale and Melissa Snyder approach their reviews from a couple's perspective. All visits are made anonymously. Comment at mhtablefortwo@comcast.net. GO!

FANDANGO

223 17th St., Pacific Grove, 372-3456

·Hours: lunch Mon.-Sat. 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; dinner daily 5 p.m.-closing;
brunch Sunday 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.

·Cards: all major

·Wheelchair access: yes

- Bar: full
 - Price range: \$14.95-market price
 - Must-orders: tapas plate; cassoulet; paella; lamb shank couscous
 - Web site: www.fandangorestaurant.com
 - Seafood Watch: not fully compliant
 - Pluses: quaint, romantic ambience; parking in lot; award-winning wine list; housemade desserts
 - Minuses: a few out-of-place selections (i.e. Oriental salad) detract; only house wines by the glass; can be expensive
 - The bottom line: Old favorite lives up to its reputation with ambience and quality.
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