

# THE VIEW

## *Restaurants Around the Bay*

- + Finding the Right Location
- + Restaurant Acoustics
- + American Grilled Cheese Kitchen

# When the Restaurant Meets the Road: Monsieur Benjamin



© 2017 Donna Schumacher, Donna Schumacher Architecture, [ds@donnaschumacher.com](mailto:ds@donnaschumacher.com)

As I was driving down Gough Street, the bright red neon fox of the upscale bistro known as Monsieur Benjamin beckoned... until one day I succumbed to the siren call of floor-to-ceiling glass, marble countertops, and light bulbs dangling from thick black cords. At night, Monsieur Benjamin glows with a warm festiveness that entices commuters lumbering by the cozy charms of the inviting and highly visible interior.

The storefront is almost perfectly clear, held in place by a slim black frame of steel that disappears into the surrounding night, silhouetting the interior of the restaurant. Streetfront banquettes of dark red leather line the Gough side, with a back support fashioned from a single piece of heavy, rough timber, held far enough away from the glass to ensure privacy and warmth for the chatting couple cozied up for a late-night bite and craft cocktail. Materials amble from inside to outside with an ease of detailing that conflates the two. A dark brick plinth secures the base, while the sand-blasted glass awning floats above, fusing sidewalk and interior as one.

The restaurant is located in the ground floor retail of 300 Grove Street, one of the many new housing complexes populating Hayes Valley. The Market and Octavia Neighborhood Plan, developed by the San Francisco Planning Department, has strict guidelines requiring retail spaces along main corridors, with the intent of promoting a lively street life, with commerce and activity day and

night. This has been more and less successful, depending on the quality of project, but here, the base building by David Baker Architects did much to set the proper stage for Aidlin Darling Design's award-winning interior.

The design of the actual storefront is also regulated by city planning: the "Standards for Storefront Transparency" are meant to ensure visibility and percentage of glass, as well as quality of materials. And Monsieur Benjamin gets it right: the storefront windows come straight to the sidewalk, allowing for them to slide completely out of the way when the weather is warm and the wind is still.

(However, it is all too easy to miss the mark instead. Just look at Avalon Hayes Valley on the corner of Oak and Octavia, or the one directly across the street. Or even the famed 8 Octavia designed by Stanley Saitowitz | Natoma Architects. Just use a dark glass that is difficult to see through and no one is curious to know more. Set the windows flush against the wall with little indentation, add a touch of mirror reflectivity, and people will walk right past without hesitation. Make the entry challenging to find and without signification highlight, or worse yet, leave the space to leftovers, too narrow for significant use on the least desirable corner, and the opportunity is quickly lost. 55 Page Street was built in 2007 and there are still vacancy signs even in this extremely popular neighborhood. Why?)

Monsieur Benjamin is set on the corner of Gough and Ivy; while Gough is too busy, Ivy is perhaps too quiet, one of the quaint alleys that adds much to the unique character of the neighborhood. Envisioning a lively café, David Baker Architects turned this liability into an asset by developing a rich landscape along the alley, creating a desirable spot for sidewalk eating. Bright orange chairs liven up the lunchtime scene, emulating the sidewalk cafés of Paris. Planters break down the scale, and trees provide shade and lessen noise levels.

(The Market Octavia Living Alleys Program was created by the San Francisco Planning Commission specifically to encourage this kind of greening and development of pedestrian spaces in alleys. Incentives were provided for developers to improve the experience of these smaller-scale streets and mitigate the increase in density to the area. This includes green space, but also murals, lighting, and traffic-calming efforts.)

As I settle into one of the stools along the long bar encircling the visible activity of the kitchen, I take a sip of my tasty cocktail. Gin and rosemary? I forget. The night is raining hard. I meet my friend,

having made a reservation several weeks in advance. (Yes, it is just that popular!) The french fries are quite delicious, as are the mussels; best of all, my curiosity is now fully satiated. This 90-seat café will always have a spot for me (and I for it), no matter what the weather.

#### About the Author



*Donna Schumacher is the founder and creative director of Donna Schumacher Architecture (DSA), a boutique architecture practice for small-scale commercial tenant improvements, retail, and residential work in the Bay Area. DSA projects range from one-of-a-kind signature elements for architectural interiors, utilizing Donna's background in the fine arts, to complex projects requiring multiple permits, tapping into her 30 years of experience with the San Francisco building department. DSA has recently introduced art consulting to its roster of services. Donna was the managing editor for the VIEW from 2012 through 2016 and is currently the editor emerita for its editorial board.*





## THANK YOU 2017 SPONSORS

for your generous sponsorship as we work together to enhance leadership, education, business networking opportunities and professional development growth for our members as influential leaders in the commercial real estate industry.

### GOLD SPONSORS



Chicago Deferred Exchange Company



### SILVER SPONSORS



### MEDIA SPONSORS



Connect with us at [www.creweastbay.org](http://www.creweastbay.org)



## THANK YOU 2017 SPONSORS

for your generous support as we work together, powering the success of women in the commercial real estate industry

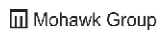
### PLATINUM

SSL  
LAW  
FIRM  
LLP

### GOLD



Allen Matkins  
CHALLENGE. OPPORTUNITY. SUCCESS.



GOLDEN STATE CARPET SERVICE, INC.



### SILVER

CB2 Builders  
Hudson Pacific Properties  
Langan  
MBH Architects  
Page & Turnbull  
Pankow Builders  
Paradigm General Contractors  
The Swig Company

### IN-KIND



LAYER CAKE WINES



JOIN TODAY AT [CREWSF.ORG](http://CREWSF.ORG)



Connect. Influence. Advance.

## THANK YOU 2017 SPONSORS

Through your generous support we continue to advance our mission to provide opportunities to our members that foster productive and supportive relationships and enhance personal and professional growth.

### SIGNATURE SPONSORS



### PARTNERSHIP SPONSORS



### MEDIA SPONSORS



Connect with us at [www.crewsv.org](http://www.crewsv.org)