

REVIEW: Bi-Rite Grocery Store (San Francisco, CA)

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PULLQUOTE:

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IMAGES: NO

The Bay Area, historically, has been on the cusp of change; this is evident in the social movements, as well as the trends in food, style and living where humanistic attitudes lead contemporary lifestyles. Maybe, it's how you use your city space, why and what statement, if any is communicated that is the greatest form of urban civil disobedience? The old mantra, You are what you eat, might be challenged with a new addition. In The Bay Area can it be simultaneously what you eat, and your engagement with others in the community in which you live that defines your identity? In the true organic nature of how neighbourhoods evolve, private space conceptually becomes the center for public engagement, and this is where new dynamics are celebrated in social exchange. Here in the land of milk and honey, public space and how Americans participate in such places has evolved beyond the mall, and the downtown big box stores. As of late, all citizens of our global empire live in a time of economic foibles, where time and money have become commodities that - like it or not - celebrate our daily lives. Through my experience, I have come to believe that conscious choices and life experiences are often celebrated around food, and this has become a new revolution that builds community in the process of reclaiming urban space.

In San Francisco a "sense of place" has been established by the corner grocery store evolving into a simultaneous culinary educational utopia and community hot spot. Bi-Rite, a third-generation grocery founded in 1940, has recharged the green grocer of generations past into one with a vintage-contemporary identity based upon the slow food movement. I shopped in the store three times a week during a one-month respite in the city, I found that many type of people, many cultures and language demographics make a beeline for the quality and experience offered here. The hipster branded identity of the market works in tandem with sustainable practices, and creates a space where the grocer is the grower, the producer and the seller. A visual combination of vintage aesthetics of reclaimed wood, calm colours as well as unpretentious smiles are thoughtfully combined in a self conscious brand of old-school retail. The owner, Sam Mogannam inherited the grocery business from his parents in 1998, it is through staff collaborations that the vision has created a new identity that has become an urban grocery Mecca for a multi-ethnic neighbourhood speaking over 15 languages. Channel your inner pedestrian, and walk on over! Bi-Rite is located between the neighbourhoods of the gay ghetto of the Castro to the west, the historic and largely Spanish speaking Mission to the southeast, and is firmly planted in the 18th Street block between Dolores and Guerrero Streets. The feeling of the area is vibrant, engaged. Bi-Rite is a vital urban oasis for the foodie at heart, the hipster deluxe and those seduced by the high pitch dog whistle of the authentic and savoury. The Bi-Rite jingle is "one step at a time, with great food and savvy education with attention to stimulate the senses will continue to create a revolution in food." You enter the space with the earthy aroma of cheese and green vegetables hit the olfactory nerves, an array of bright colors of oranges (Do oranges really come in that many hues and colors?..) Your

wallet might be crunched in the process, however with multiple expeditions to Bi-Rite I discovered the value of making conscious cooking decisions based on planning and an awareness of budget, a pint of blue berries from Sonoma Valley and fresh yogurt for breakfast three days in a row, \$8.00 total, for dinner organic carrots from a local garden with thyme and mint, and a rack of lamb for all for \$14.00. The wooden floor beneath your feet creaks with the silent maniacal shuffling of shoppers ambling about, and the occasional bark of the Deli area “who’s next please” that warms the heart. On the other hand, both a rack of lamb, organic greens and a bottle of wine can easily set you back \$50.00. Shop wisely friends...Comparatively, making choices over recognized name brand vs. local and the Bi-Rite home spun – I found the cost to be generally the same. Poetically speaking, who can refuse a local honey that is offered to you, potentially made by the bees you see on a daily walk by someone’s Mom?

A San-Francisco-certified “Green Business”, Bi-Rite appears to be leading by example. Bees harvested for honey are housed on the roof and sold in the market below. Much of the seasonal produce is locally grown at the Bi-Rite farm in Sonoma and the Apple Ranch in Placerville, 90 minutes from the market. Jams, jellies, preserves, and chutneys are “put up” by the owner’s mother and sold for low profit on the shelf. The reintroduction to “old fashioned” food practices, has created a pique for new food experiences and the market is serving as an education zone in the process. As Bi-Rite declares, these initiatives allow the grocer to be placed in “the unique position of being the farmer, producer and retailer.” Speciality items are all specially chosen by the staff, and dotted about with colourful hand writing on index cards placed next to the featured item, the enthusiastic and honest tones belie the goodness of a specific product, and the enthusiastic endorsement. As food sources become more and more privatized, so does the experience of buying. As big box-stores such as WholeFoods have largely mainstreamed the “organic food” notion to the general public, so has the experience become somewhat banal, the next step is speciality stores which cater to a specific audience offering quality education about food to augment the classic American retail experience. Bi-Rite offers local grown as well as global tastes in an environment centered on the experience of shopping and food education in tandem with cooking classes, and seminars of food production. The new way of American culinary know-how harkens to a slower period, a space that seems to address a new type of efficiency that is not about the management of time, rather the enjoyment and value of the time. Rather, this local trend speaks to a new value regarding a quality experience where food and at home culinary experiences can be the new conductor in this revolution. The recent rediscovery of Julia Childs Cookbook, *The French Chef* within popular culture is an example – after 45 years, again the classic tome is at the top of the New York Times Bestseller list.

The Bi-Rite staff is unpretentious, smart and adorable! If you want to sample a particular hand-cut artisan cheese from a 124-year-old farm in Dorset, England to a particular high end sustainable Oregon grown Pinot Noir – this crew speaks the lingo with casual fluency. One afternoon I was greeted by a buxom blonde with pigtails wearing a rather kitschy gingham blouse, offering samples of beer! This is not high-pressure retail, rather the tone is “I want to assist you, what are you interested in learning and eating, let’s talk about it”. The active growers and suppliers train the staff on new products, food

processes, and cultural specific foods monthly by the owner and the management, as well as. Bi-rite emulates the dense urban fabric of the city, with shelves that are abundantly crammed. However, each layer offers a thoughtfully placed robust find. Form does follow function, the collaborative attitude at Bi-Rite seems to define a current shift in sustainability to one of quiet social progress with urban connectivity where neighbor meets neighbor and food and education are presented in tandem.

The often misused terms of “green” and “organic” are revealed to the shopper as a linked experience celebrating the local, the regional, and the favourable. Seasonal is the emphasis from Bok Choy to Napa Valley cucumbers to Sonoma Valley figs. Seasonal produce is featured, alongside organic grown year-round fruit. Apples, squash and persimmons in the fall from Northern California, or oranges in the early summer, Kale in the winter. Many consumers have lost track of seasonal produce, Bi-Rite educates or reminds us about the earth and the offers a reintroduction to the seasons of our daily lives. The experience in this 1,000 square feet space is unique. Typically, deli or boutique grocery stores cater to a Eurocentric identity. However, Bi-Rite yields multiple choices, from as many continents and countries, creating an attitude of inclusivity. The deli area is ripe with exotic and typical cheeses from local to global. An in-house butcher (doggedly handsome, I might add) aims to please, and will happily let you select from a wide range of fresh, organically produced meats. (Halal, Kosher and other religious options are available upon order.) These delicacies range from Parma ham and honey smoked bacon, to a freshly plucked chicken all presented with a debonair flourish. Bi-Rite has maintained somewhat of the nostalgia of a white-collar grocery store, complete with chatty “check-out clerks” who remember your purchases from previous visits, or flirt in a conversation. Questions and comments are openly encouraged from “guests” about the products, helpful suggestions arrive in the casual diphthong of a San Francisco accent that yields buried treasures archived in the store. Your inner gourmet will come out of the closet, head to the smiley cashiers in blue aprons, and announce your gourmand fetish as the contents of your shopping basket are revealed.

Just one more coup to push the apple cart over. Bi-Rite also owns and manages a non-profit gallery and event space around the corner, within a stone’s throw of the market. The non-profit mission of the venue is simple: “promote dialogue between our neighborhood and people who create art and food.” The typical white walls and gallery-like-cube is a space that supports the community and engaged in the community with classes, art events, community gathering space. Classes range from learning how cheese is made, How to make an omelette or how to “take down a hog” in making pate, charcuterie, and other fare. The space also functions as a community gathering point for local political initiatives and interests as a free open-door service. The hubbub in Bi-Rite flows onto the 18th street corridor creating the often missing, and much sought after sense of place, which gentrification often seems to erase. The city block that houses 45-year-old Bi-Rite and three restaurants and a 5-year-old bakery have indeed created a landmark where one was not present prior. The space feels urban, alive as well as vibrant.

My last day in the Bay Area I walked from nearby Dolores Park to Bi-Rite and sampled a whole-wheat carrot cake with rich frosting from hand milked cows, (The clerk had big

hands I noticed and a toothy grin to boot!) I bought two jars of the homemade-honey and a homegrown tomato, had a humorous conversation about Niagara Region wines, and managed to sample basil leaves from the largest plant I have ever seen. Leaving the space, I thought about how gentrification seems to overturn the authentic experience into one of erasure, the sensitivity in which a basic human need of food, and the participation and education in this act, creating an organic gesture that embrace all types of people, diversity, and honor the earth in a respectful way. Bi-Rite demonstrates this through social sustainability on many fronts, and uses ye olde capitalist American ideals of the almighty dollar to reenergize and model a new process that fits all with the eye on the ball of a healthy, thoughtful socially based planet.

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