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SIX OF A KIND: **OUTDOOR DINING**

The Alfresco Experience

By Michael Bauer

Until a few years ago, it was tough to find a really good place in the Bay Area to dine outdoors; now that has changed. For one thing, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors has reduced the permit fees for outdoor tables, so more restaurants are adding that European sidewalk-cafe sensibility.

The outdoor options are wide-ranging, from the popular rooftop grill at Medjool, for example; the patio and movies at Foreign Cinema; and the most elegant of all — the Terrace at the Ritz-Carlton, surrounded by the handsome neoclassic building. And then there's Belden Place with Plouf, B44 and a half dozen other restaurants that have transformed a service alley into one of the city's hidden delights.

I could choose scores of outdoor places outside the city, too — the tree-shaded terrace at Va de Vi in Walnut Creek; the beautiful garden and vineyard views at Bistro Don Giovanni in Napa; the outdoor porch at Bay Wolf in Oakland. So it's with great difficulty that I finally settled on the following six stellar venues.

EL DORADO KITCHEN

When the heat hits the Sonoma Valley, few things can compare to sitting on the stone terrace under the stately branches of an ancient fig tree at El Dorado Kitchen, surrounded by canopies of lacy wisteria. Located on the Sonoma Square, in what used to be Piatti, Justin Everett creates a sophisticated farm-fresh menu, including house-made charcuterie, a warm artichoke tart and lamb three ways with a summer bean cassoulet. At lunch, you can get pizza, BLT and a chopped salad.

405 First St. (at West Spain), Sonoma; (707) 996-3030. Lunch, dinner daily.