

# Datebook

Leah Garchik:  
How do I really  
love you? E6

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE AND SFGATE.COM | Thursday, September 15, 2011 | Section E



Photos by David Paul Morris / Special to The Chronicle

Sausan Molthen, owner and chef of Al-Masri, performs a belly dance routine during her birthday party celebration at the restaurant.



David Gray / The CW

Cassie (Britt Robertson) loses her mom in a witch-sparked fire and goes to Chance Harbor.

DAVID WIEGAND  
Television

## Cackling at these witches

It may seem ridiculous to complain that "The Secret Circle," Kevin Williamson's new teen-witch show on the CW, isn't very believable, especially considering

**The Secret Circle:** Dramatic series, 9 tonight on the CW.

that Williamson is also the creator of the network's enduringly addictive "The Vampire Diaries."

But there are moments in "The Secret Circle," premiering at 9 tonight, when you're likely to fall into mini fits of giggling at the show's implausibility.

In addition to the vampire thing, Williamson was also the guy behind the soapy teen drama "Dawson's Creek," which may explain at least part of the genesis for "Circle." Basically, what he's done is to take the hormone-fueled teenage angst of "Creek" and pump it into a story about a secret circle of young witches and warlocks in the improbably named town of Chance Harbor, Wash.

The formula still works fine for "Diaries," which, not coincidentally, launches its new season just before the premiere of "Circle," but it doesn't quite work here. Is it just because, with film and

Circle continues on E6

## RESTAURANTS

# Dancing among cultures

Egyptian place lets patrons learn cuisine, as owner has

By Lisa Wallace  
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Sausan Molthen, owner of Al-Masri Egyptian restaurant in San Francisco, might be described as a woman as eclectic as her restaurant.

**Inside:** The Inside Scoop, plus restaurant reviews E2, E6

**Sunday:** A guide to making the most of your skillet Food & Wine

To describe Molthen's profession is to list the passions of a Bay Area individualist. Molthen, 57, is executive chef at Al-Masri, a belly dancing teacher and a baker, supplying syrupy

pans of baklava to cafes like Brown Owl Coffee Shop.

Al-Masri is also one of a kind. Located in a residential section of the Richmond



Molthen seasons her Egyptian stuffed chicken dish before placing it in the oven at her restaurant, in San Francisco's Richmond District.

District, the storefront, outfitted with rainbow stripes, a bright blue awning and larger-than-life murals of ancient Egyptians guarding its doors,

is unapologetically garish.

Sitting in its equally opulent interior, Molthen recounts the restaurant's history through a

Al-Masri continues on E3

## OPERA REVIEW

# 'Idomeneo' mines ancient Crete to open Opera San Jose season

By Joshua Kosman  
CHRONICLE MUSIC CRITIC

Mozart's "Idomeneo," the first fruit of the young composer's operatic maturity, is set in ancient Crete, in the aftermath of the Trojan War. That doesn't mean it needs to be presented in period style — but, on the other hand, why not?

The beautiful and stately production that

**Idomeneo:** Opera San Jose. Through Sept. 25. California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose. \$51-\$101. (408) 437-4450. www.operasj.org.

opens the season for Opera San Jose takes its cues from the world of archaeology, with an assist from the scholars at the Packard Humanities Institute.

It presents a world in

which the opera's principal drama — the story of how an ill-considered vow of human sacrifice can conflict with the most elemental family ties — plays out against a backdrop of elaborately crafted sets and costumes inspired by the Mycenaean period.

The result, in Tuesday's performance at the California Theatre, was a stretch of elegant pag-

"Idomeneo" continues on E6



P. Kirk

Tenor Christopher Bengochea in the title role fared best in the climactic declarations of Act 2 in Mozart's "Idomeneo," which opened Opera San Jose's season.

Opening Monday, September 19<sup>th</sup> at Hillsdale Shopping Center

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## DATEBOOK

LEAH GARCHIK

## Personal declaration on the sidewalk



Expression of despair after breakup of relationship? Confirmation of long-lasting devotion and affection? Make-up offer? The graffiti "I still love you" scrawled on a square of sidewalk concrete in the Haight-Ashbury raises many possibilities:

- ▶ "I still love you" (although everybody else thinks you're a jerk).
- ▶ "I still love you" (but frankly, Scarlett, it ain't worth it).
- ▶ "I still love you" (and as I explained to the cops, I am not a stalker).
- ▶ "I still love you" (even if I came home from Burning Man with someone else).

\* \* \*

In celebration of its 20th anniversary, the Aurora Theatre is presenting **Edward Albee's** "A Delicate Balance," and the playwright himself was here last week for opening night, as well as festivities at Arion Press, which published a new edition of the play.

Albee's remarks were music to the ears of the Bay Area theater gang: "American theater, intelligent theater, is alive and well in the regional houses like Aurora, not Broadway."

P.S.: Albee and friend **Alex Mark-with's** itinerary included a visit to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to see the **Stein** collection on its last day, and a visit to the **David Ireland** house on Capp Street with gallerist **Paule Anglim**.

\* \* \*

Central City Extra reports that a coalition of groups, the Alliance to Save Lives, wants San Francisco to be the first city in the country with safe injection sites — clean needles, hygienic surroundings — for drug users. Former Tenderloin police Capt. **Gary Jimenez** and District Attorney **George Gascon** are among supporters.

Gascon told the Extra that "safe, clean sites for injection are preferable to unsafe behavior that impacts the community and the user. I support the identification of appropriate sites for the safety of the user and the community."

\* \* \*

▶ The Eater.com sister blogs, in San Francisco and Dallas, report that Fort Worth chef **Casey Thompson**, who's a spokeswoman for Walmart's Sam's Club bulk

groceries and was "axed from 'Top Chef All Stars' " for chicken feet that were deemed "inedible," says she is "looking at Napa Valley for a spot ... a temporary concept." If Walmart is involved, says the local site, "we're not sure how that would go out here."

▶ At a kids' soccer game in San Carlos, **Pat Ivester** says one Baby Boomer dad wore a sweatshirt with "a slight alteration ... 'Old Navel.'" And as to **Peter Fimrite's** report of the many blue whales that feed along the California coast, **Randy Alfred** wonders if that makes us "the berth of the blues."

▶ Downstairs in the lobby of the Sir Frances Drake, there's a new larger-than-life statue of doorman **Tom Sweeney**.

▶ Having read that the Postal Service has taken away many street-corner mailboxes, **Ken Maley** noticed a postal truck parked at 2:30 p.m. the other day at MacArthur Avenue and Franklin Street in Fort Mason. There's heretofore been a regular pickup at that time on that corner. The truck was double-parked, as usual, he said, "but that driver was standing scratching his head, as there was no longer a box there."

▶ **Country Joe McDonald**, who's done a "Tribute to Woody Guthrie" show for 10

years, will do it Saturday at Freight and Salvage. This time, he'll be filmed by **Pete Slauson** for a DVD to be released in December.

\* \* \*

▶ Stuck in southbound traffic in the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge, **Paul "The Lobster" Wells** saw a fellow motorist nip out of his car, jump the fence, duck into the portable potty there for workers, emerge, jump the fence again, get back into his car and complete the journey. Wells was so stunned, he didn't notice whether other drivers hit their horns at this sight.

"The guy was quick," he notes.

▶ And in the backseat of a casual carpool to San Francisco from the East Bay on Wednesday, **Kathleen Dinetz** was listening as driver and front-seat passenger discussed their adventures at Burning Man. "I haven't showered today," said one woman to the other. "I want to keep the dust close just one more day."

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JON CARROLL will return.

UPDATE By Michael Bauer

## Miss Pearl's has changed emphasis

When it opened in 2008 at Jack London Square in Oakland, Miss Pearl's Jam House tried to reproduce the Caribbean and Island-style cuisine that made it famous when it opened in 1988 alongside the Phoenix Hotel in San Francisco. That space is now Chambers Eat+Drink, which I reviewed in Sunday's Food & Wine section.

Noted designer Michael Brennan did his part by creating a tropical environment with lots of shells and weathered wood in the 280-seat space, which includes an outdoor patio, bar and private dining rooms.

Chip Conley, who owns the Phoenix Hotel and manages a dozen other properties, including the hotel above Chambers, even brought back Miss Pearl's original chef, **Joey Altman**, as a consultant.

However, in the past three years, the food has changed; under chef **Eddie Blyden**, it's now Southern, with heavy leanings to New Orleans. Gone is the jerk and ginger; now there's seafood jambalaya (\$21), smoke barbecued ribs with Creole potato salad (\$21), and red beans and rice (\$12/\$19).

I'd like to report that the food does the South proud, but between the alternating attentive and forgetful service and the missteps in execution, I'd have to say that's not necessarily the case.

The Southern sweet potato soup (\$4/\$7) was so thick you could literally eat it with a fork, and was so weighted with raw spices that any trace of the star ingredient was snuffed out. The black-eyed pea salad (\$7), with "summer vegetables" that turned out to be a few kernels of corn, was in a Sherry pomegranate vinaigrette that tasted like something you'd find in a deli case at a chain supermarket and was surrounded by tough, partly wilted greens.

The shrimp in the New Orleans barbecued shrimp

## Miss Pearl's Jam House

1 Broadway (at the Embarcadero), Oakland; (510) 944-7171 or [misspearlsjamhouse.com](http://misspearlsjamhouse.com). Breakfast 7-10 a.m. Monday-Friday; brunch 8 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday-Sunday; lunch 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday-Friday; dinner 5-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday and until 11 p.m. Friday-Sunday. Full bar. Reservations and credit cards accepted. Paid lots.

Overall	★½
Food	★½
Service	★
Atmosphere	★★★
Prices	\$\$\$
Noise Rating	▲▲▲▲

(\$12) tasted suspiciously like the frozen ones I've found at Costco, and the garlic and herb butter sauce was more like a thick cream surrounded by herb oil; it was OK, but seemed like a loose interpretation of what I found in New Orleans, and not nearly as good.

I wish more dishes were as

good as the fire-roasted half chicken (\$21), even though I was surprised when it came gooey from a lightly spiced sauce and served with yellow wax beans, set on Cajun red rice.

I almost skipped dessert because it took so long for the waiter to appear and take the order, but I stuck around for the bourbon chocolate bread pudding (\$8). It was soggy but topped with an exceptional butter pecan ice cream, and there was a much more satisfying nectarine and berry crisp (\$8).

It turned out to be the conclusion of a meal that, if I didn't recognize the tropical-inspired decor, would have seemed like a totally different restaurant than what I experienced a few years ago.

*Michael Bauer is The Chronicle's restaurant critic. E-mail him at [mbauer@sfgate.com](mailto:mbauer@sfgate.com), and go to [sfgate.com/food](http://sfgate.com/food) to read his previous reviews. Find his blog daily at [insidescoopsf.com](http://insidescoopsf.com), and follow him on Twitter at [@michaelbauer1](https://twitter.com/michaelbauer1).*

DEAR ABBY By Jeanne Phillips

## Niece tells kids to break rule they don't like

**Dear Abby:** I go to movies with my niece "Connie" and her two kids. Though the theater has a sign "No Outside Food or Drinks Allowed," Connie sneaks snacks in, then doles them out after the lights go down. I agree with my niece that the price of refreshments is outrageous, I also believe it's the theater operators' prerogative to set prices and policy. When I offered to pay, she said it wasn't about the money, it was "the principle," and besides, "everybody else does it."

I feel my niece is teaching her kids it's OK to break rules you find inconvenient as long as you can get away with it. I'd love your opinion.

*Paying for My Popcorn in Oregon*

**Dear Paying:** Here it is: Your thinking is spot on. Your niece's behavior is dishonest, and children model their behavior on the example set by their parents.

Theater owners earn a large portion of their profits not from ticket sales, but from their concession stands. I am often struck by the amount of food I see purchased before people enter a theater — large tubs of popcorn, king-size candy bars, bucket-size soft drinks and nachos.

Connie should feed them a healthy meal before the movie so they won't be hungry.

**Dear Abby:** After six years of marriage I am seven months pregnant. I never wanted children and did not expect this to happen. I feel nothing for this baby and I also hate being pregnant. I mentioned my feelings to my husband and he became furious with me. Is there something wrong with me?

*Lacks the Mothering Gene*

**Dear Lacks:** There's nothing "wrong" with you. You're just not particularly maternal. I'm sure many women have felt as you do because more than half the pregnancies in the United States are "unplanned."

Discuss this with your obstetrician to be sure you're not suffering from pre-partum depression.

Write to Dear Abby at P.O. Box 69440, Los Angeles, CA 90069 or [dearabby.com](mailto:dearabby.com).

*Universal Press Syndicate*

## 'Idomeneo' a fitting Grecian tribute

"Idomeneo" from page E1

eantry, not always particularly animated but vividly colorful and done with a keen sense of Mozartean style.

That latter quality came courtesy of conductor George Cleve, who led the performance with a combination of assiduous care and theatrical panache. The orchestral playing was streamlined and shapely throughout, and a crisp rhythmic style predominated.

Still, the evening's most striking aspect was the physical production, with sets by Steven C. Kemp, costumes by Johann Stegmeir and lighting by Christopher Ostrom. "Idomeneo," like countless operas before and since, takes its inspiration from Greek antiquity, but productions that follow suit in a conscientious way are much rarer.

So instead of stylized porti-

cos and generic tunics, this "Idomeneo" was bedecked with colorful mosaics and carefully styled costumes, and director Brad Dalton moved his performers through with deft efficiency (Dennis Nahat's choreography was in a more familiar operatic style). Even without specific knowledge of the archaeology involved, the effect was exciting.

The star of Tuesday's performance (like all of the company's offerings, "Idomeneo" is double cast) was soprano Rebecca Davis, who gave a magnificent performance as the captive — and love-struck — Trojan princess Iliia. Singing with vigor and precision, she gave voice to the character's emotional turmoil without stinting at all on the dynamism and grace of Mozart's writing.

As Elettra, her rival in love, soprano Christina Major gave a performance of deftly con-

trolled fury, exploding at last in the jagged, emotionally fraught vocal display of her final aria, "D'Oreste, d'AJace."

Tenor Christopher Bengochea sang the title role in a manner better suited for the Romantic repertoire, unleashing a large and not always disciplined sound. He fared best in the climactic declarations of Act 2, delivered with force and resolution; the final aria, "Torna la pace," sounded strained.

Tenor Aaron Blake gave an energetic if not especially sweet-toned performance as Idomeneo's son Idamante, and there were capable contributions from Nova Safo (Arbace), Mathew Edwardson (the High Priest) and Silas Elash (the Celestial Voice). The chorus, led by Andrew Whitfield, sounded particularly strong.

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P. Kirk

**Soprano Rebecca Davis gave a magnificent performance as the captive — and love-struck — Trojan princess Iliia in Opera San Jose's "Idomeneo."**

## They make credibility disappear

Circle from page E1

TV awash with vampires, we find it easier to suspend disbelief in long-toothed blood suckers than we do in a bunch of high schoolers who can make drops of water hover in mid-air, cars erupt

in flames and thunderstorms descend out of nowhere?

Nope. It isn't.

It's about believable plot, depth of writing and knowing enough to stay away from over-used "types" instead of credible characters.

The premise of the show is that pretty blond Cassie (Britt Robertson) loses her mom in a witch-sparked fire and repairs to Chance Harbor to live with her grandmother. On her first day at a new school, she encounters, in short order, the Mean Girl, Faye

Chamberlain (Phoebe Tonkin); the Good Girl, Diana (Shelley Hennig); the Cute Boy Who's In Love With the Good Girl but Who's Hot to Lock Lips With Cassie, Adam (Thomas Dekker); the Mean Girl's Somewhat Less Mean Sidekick, Melissa (Jessica Parker Kennedy); and the Cute But Nerdy Other Guy, Nick (Louis Hunter). Among the grown-ups, Natasha Henstridge plays the school principal and Gale Harold is a witch dad.

Turns out that all of these kids are basically the Campfire Girls

and Cub Scouts of a now-broken secret circle of grown-up witches, half of whom died in some mysterious way years before, leaving all the kids to be raised in single-witch households. By the way, for some odd reason, the sons of witches (I just wanted to write that, sorry) are not called warlocks here.

As in so many films and TV shows in this genre, the supernatural stuff is somewhat secondary to impossibly attractive teenagers in love and lust. That alone doesn't mean it has to be

bad — witness MTV's "Teen Wolf," which found the prettiest teenagers in Hollywood and gave them a compelling story, credible plot twists and adequate dialogue to speak.

None of this is likely to matter to anyone over 17, because "Circle" is aimed at a teenage audience. At least, I hope it is, because if the CW thinks the show will be a hit with adults, the network must be run by chimps.

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