



# HOME

For litigator and restaurateur  
Stuart Gordon '65,  
life's a banquet

**S**eated at a linen-draped four-top on a chilly Wednesday night, Stu Gordon studies the menu intently, his gaze bouncing from the left-hand page, Classics (down-home comfort food: pot roast, flatiron steak, mac and cheese), to the right-hand page, Seasonal (garlic mussels, roasted asparagus, dungeness crab salad). His eyes ping-pong left and right as if there were a lot riding on his choice. In fact, Gordon has chosen every item on the menu: He is the hands-on major owner of Home, an upscale diner in San Francisco's lively Castro district.

# PLATES

BY JON JEFFERSON

The object of his careful scrutiny is a brand new revision that Gordon hopes will walk the hard-to-define line between dependability and novelty. “We have a lot of repeat customers,” he explains, seated beside one of them—his wife, Florianne, who dines with him at Home once or twice a week. “Our regulars like to see their favorites on the menu. But if we don’t offer new things from time to time, they might get bored and decide they need to try someplace else.” The menu’s new Classics/Seasonal division—Gordon’s idea—is Home’s way of saying that it’s dependable, but not asleep at the stove.

Gordon—a top-tier attorney and a founding partner of Gordon & Rees, one of California’s leading commercial litigation firms—is also a dead-serious restaurateur. He fires off restaurant stats with machine-gun rapidity. “The average stay is one hour,” he says, surveying the crowd at the surrounding tables. “Tonight we’ll do 250; tomorrow night, 325; the weekend nights, 375.” He frowns briefly. “Last Sunday was an off night,” he concedes. “We were down by a hundred, because everybody was home watching the Academy Awards. So next year we’ll have an Oscar party, and give prizes for the three best costumes.” He says it with the air of a man who’s already sent the Oscar-party memo to the restaurant’s staff.

Gordon’s gradual transformation into a world-class foodie and owner of high-end eateries was unlikely, and he still

seems a bit surprised by it. “When I was a kid,” he recalls, “we never went out to eat more than once or twice a year. And my father had high blood pressure, so our food at home was unsalted.” Half a century later, the recollected blandness still causes Gordon chagrin. “And when I was in college, the fraternity food was terrible. I was seriously flavor-deprived.”

The scales fell from his palate during his third year at Boalt. “I moved to San Francisco that year,” he says—he’d taken a job at a law firm in the city—“and I started eating out almost every night.” It didn’t take long for him to notice what he’d been missing all those years and to begin making up for lost time. “It was probably the beef bourguignon that did it,” he laughs. “That and the red wine at La Bourgogne. They changed my life.”

At first, he was content to be an up-and-coming epicure. Then, in 1981, some of Gordon’s friends invited him to join a new Napa Valley restaurant, Auberge du Soleil. Helmed by a Swiss-trained Japanese chef, Masataka Kobayashi (“Chef Masa”), Auberge du Soleil rocketed to fame among Napa Valley’s fine-dining venues. Two years later, Masa decided to open a San Francisco restaurant, and Gordon agreed to back that one—Masa’s—as well. The restaurant’s French-Japanese fusion cuisine made it a swift success among San Francisco’s fussy food fanatics.

During his nearly three decades of restaurant investing, Gordon’s portfolio has encompassed dozens of upscale

# FIVE-STAR SERVICE

*In 2009, Gordon received the Boalt Hall Alumni Association’s Citation Award, the highest honor bestowed on Boalt alumni, for his dedication to public service, his contributions to the legal profession, and his support of Boalt Hall. The citation’s text:*

“Over the course of his career, Gordon has helped build the robust law firm of Gordon & Rees and received numerous awards for his successful trial record, including California Litigation Attorney of the Year (*California Lawyer*), five successive years as a Northern California Super Lawyer (*Law & Politics*), and inclusion in the International and California editions of *Who’s Who Legal* for product liability defense. Gordon is actively involved in a wide range of community affairs, serving as past president and director of The Guardsmen, chairman of the Juvenile Justice Commission for the City and County of San Francisco, and board member of the Legal Aid Society of San Francisco, San Francisco General Hospital, and the San Francisco Boys and Girls Clubs. Gordon is a member of the Boalt Hall Campaign Cabinet and past president of its Alumni Association. He is also co-founder of UC Berkeley’s Bear Backers, an organization which raises over \$8.3 million a year to support athletic programs at the University, and he serves on the advisory board for the Cal athletic director.”



PHOTO: JIM BLOK

California eateries, including Restaurant Gary Danko (“the finest restaurant in San Francisco,” Gordon says) and The French Laundry, which is considered one of the best restaurants in the entire nation. But Home is where Gordon’s heart is. “We have a special relationship with Home,” he says, as a server delivers fanned-out slices of ripe avocado for Florianne’s salad. “I’ve put a lot of money into it, and we spend a lot of time here.”

### From League to Legal

Gordon would never have tasted that life-changing beef bourguignon were it not for a curve ball life threw him after his junior year at UC Berkeley. A serious jock back then, he was a starting pitcher for the Cal baseball team, and the 1961 season began brilliantly for him. “I was 7 and 0,” he says, “with an earned-run average well under two.”

Then, batting during a summer practice game, he laid down a bunt and sprinted for first base. “The ball, the first baseman, and I got there at the same time,” he recalls. The ill-fated collision tore a ligament in Gordon’s pitching shoulder, and the shoulder—like Gordon’s fastball—was never the same again.

Though he played again his senior year, his hopes for a career in professional baseball were gone.

With baseball off the table, a legal career was a natural choice: The courthouse was nearly as familiar to him as the baseball diamond. His father, Jack, served for many years as the master calendar clerk for the Los Angeles County Courts. During high school, Gordon had a part-time job as a runner at the L.A. County Courthouse, picking up and delivering the plaintiffs’ jury books.

Boalt Hall was a natural choice, too, and not just because Gordon earned his undergrad degree from Cal. “The dean of the law school, Frank Newman, was a big baseball fan,” he chuckles, “so he made it easy for me to get in.” No doubt Newman also recognized Gordon’s smarts and drive to excel: Gordon was elected president of Boalt’s class of 1965, and was the class’s top grade earner as well.

“I got my first job at age seven,” he says, “when I took over



DINERS CLUB: Stu Gordon and his wife, Florianne, dine together at Home restaurant once or twice a week.

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my brother’s newspaper route. I’ve been working ever since. From the time I was seven, I’ve never taken more than two consecutive weeks off work.” Besides delivering newspapers and running jury books, Gordon has hawked popcorn and souvenirs at Hollywood Stars baseball games, entered flight information in United Airlines’ computer system, and done gumshoe work during a summertime college stint at a private-investigation agency. And during his third year of law school, he worked 30 hours a week at Walkup Downing Wallach & Sterns.

Gordon attributes his work ethic to the same source as his love of baseball and his penchant for treating everybody—from clients to bus boys—with courtesy and encouragement: his dad. “My father left home for work every morning at six-thirty,” he says, “but he always made time to come to my baseball games.” And watched with an expert eye: He played semipro baseball as a young man and passed his knowledge and skills on to Gordon.

### Medicine Man

In the early years of his legal career, Gordon discovered and cultivated a talent for

medicine-related litigation. In 1974, he and Donald Rees—a Stanford law grad with whom he worked when both were young associates at Walkup Downing Wallach & Sterns—partnered to form their own firm, Gordon & Rees.

The firm is now a litigation powerhouse with 17 offices in 11 states and a stable of more than 400 attorneys. Uncharacteristically, the exact number eludes Gordon. “It’s hard to keep track,” he says, “because we’re always hiring. We’re more insulated from the recession than many firms because we do a lot of litigation.” Being top dog at an enormously successful enterprise hasn’t dulled Gordon’s prodigious appetite for work. “It’s important to me to be a major contributor at my firm,” Gordon says. “I’m often the first one there in the morning and the last one to leave at night.”

Gordon quickly carved out a reputation for skillfully defending medical malpractice cases. Over the years, though, he’s found himself drawn more to pharmaceutical and medical-device litigation. “You deal with a really interesting array of

people in these cases—medical directors, the people who watch for increased claims, the folks involved in regulatory oversight. It's fascinating to get a case involving a product you know nothing about—a product that's taken years to develop and bring to the market—and then delve into it and find out as much as you can."

One product he's become an expert on during the past two years is fen-phen, the two-drug anti-obesity combination that became wildly popular in the early and mid-1990s, only to be abruptly withdrawn from the market later in the decade after being implicated in serious heart and lung problems. In 2008, Gordon and Florianne planned to take a two-week African safari—a rare vacation—but pharmaceutical giant Wyeth, which was confronting billions of dollars worth of fen-phen liability claims, tapped Gordon to be its national counsel. Two years later, in late March of this year, the couple finally took off to Africa.

### Fast Company

Not surprisingly, Gordon plays as hard as he works. He's completed 54 marathons, logging tens of thousands of miles on training runs and in races. "In 2003, Florianne threw a 50,000-mile party for me," he says. "She invited everybody I'd run at least a thousand miles with. There were probably ten of those people, including several I'd run 10,000 miles with."

"I'm on my Blackberry every day from six in the morning until at least eleven at night."

—Stu Gordon

Florianne—a competitive runner since the 1970s—has run thousands of miles with him; they met at the 1982 New York City Marathon. "I ran it in 3:33," Gordon recalls. "Florianne ran a 2:52." She outpaced Gordon by more than 90 seconds a mile. "She was the fastest woman in Northern California," he brags. A week after they met, he and Florianne ran the Golden Gate Marathon; Gordon struggled through the first half with her, then hit the wall.

Though no longer running marathons, Gordon still works out an hour a day, usually in a spin class or on an elliptical machine. He's got the heart and lungs of a man half his age and, judging from his cell-phone regimen, an Olympic-class pair of thumbs. "I'm on my Blackberry every day from six in the morning until at least eleven at night," he says, a claim to which Florianne nods eye-rolling assent. "My rule is, I don't go to bed if there are unanswered messages."

Multitasking seems to be part of Gordon's DNA. "My mind goes off in so many different directions," he says, "it's hard for me to stay focused on one thing." Indeed, during an initial 15-minute telephone interview for this article, Gordon used his Blackberry to finalize the new menu and wine list for Home, review the financial performance of The French Laundry, line up tickets for a Cal-Arizona State basketball game, and review the agenda for an upcoming meeting of the Cal athletic director's advisory board.



FRENCH BLISS: Stu Gordon's first restaurant investment was Auberge du Soleil, a French eatery in Napa Valley. Nearly 30 years later, it still ranks as one of Northern California's finest dining establishments.

PHOTO: AUBERGE RESORTS

## Home Run

Having hit the ball out of the park, professionally and financially, it would be understandable if Gordon—now an astonishingly youthful 69—chose to take an easy jog around the bases from here on out. Instead, he still hustles as if he were stealing second in the ninth inning of a tie game. He's generally up by six every day, and his day starts with Home. "First thing every morning, I look at all the financials from the night before," he says. "They send them every night around 12:30, and I see them at 6:30." So far the latest financials suggest that the restaurant's new menu is striking the right balance with customers, although you can bet Gordon will be tracking them closely to make sure.

An hour after sitting down at the table, Gordon's polishing off a roasted pork chop, one of the new Seasonal offerings. True to Home's bounteous tradition, the chop measures nearly two inches thick and comes with generous sides of bourbon-glazed sweet potatoes and sautéed chard. Gordon polishes off the chop and the potatoes, but he leaves some of the chard behind. "It's a little bitter for me," he shrugs. "I don't want anything bitter in my life."

"Don't bring me bad news," Florianne chimes in, quoting what seems to be one of Gordon's mantras.

He nods. "No bad news, and no bitterness."

There's no hint of either in the congenial hustle and bustle of Gordon's pride and joy. Surrounded by the clatter of plates, the clinking of wineglasses and silverware, and the chatter of half a hundred other conversations, Stu Gordon looks content and, if only for the moment, relaxed.

Home, sweet Home.



# MOVEABLE FEAST



**STU GORDON** has done his due diligence when it comes to comparison dining. His work requires a lot of globe-trotting, and by his reckoning—which tends to be meticulously accurate—he has dined at more than 3,000 restaurants around the world.

He's brought tasting notes back Home, of course, but also to three dozen other restaurants in which he has invested, including 23 currently.



When he's not tucking into a Home-cooked meal in the Castro, he might be found frequenting one of these other favorites from his portfolio:

**Auberge du Soleil** | Rutherford (Napa Valley)  
Cuisine: French

**Epic Roasthouse** | San Francisco  
Cuisine: Traditional and contemporary steakhouse

**The French Laundry** | Yountville (Napa Valley)  
Cuisine: Country French and American

**Gary Danko** | San Francisco  
Cuisine: New American

**Masa's** | San Francisco  
Cuisine: Contemporary French

