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pomme bébé feeds the wee goo-goo gourmet

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THE chef had cooked at some real quality joints, including Laguna Beach's Picayo. And while he'd served his fair share of petulant customers, he had not officially cooked for babies -- a task that sounded simpler than it would ultimately prove. No salt, said the proprietor of Newport Beach's pomme bébé. No butter and no cream, either. But I'm French, said the chef; we all but butter our butter.

"It was a challenge," says Laurent Brazier, an instructor at Laguna Culinary Arts School and pomme bébé's executive chef. "I worked my way around the problem and was pretty impressed by what I was able to achieve."

What he cooked up is simply satisfying fare for developing palettes. Goo-goo, dada. Pomme bébé, which opened in October, presents a wide-ranging menu of squishy, delicious sustenance. There's the single fruit and vegetable paste fit for half-year-olds who are just venturing away from the breast, alongside heartier dishes such as a macaroni and cheese (flecked with brown rice) that dad might be tempted stick his spoon into on Super Bowl Sunday.

Inside the Newport Beach store, children can sidle up to pomme bébé's one-of-a-kind tasting bar. If such a station is hard to imagine, conjure with the mind's eye an ultra-modern sushi bar -- curved glass where a sneeze guard might be. Nearby, babies chow down in comfy and elevated egg-shaped pods: high chairs for the 21st century. But sleek as the décor is, pomme bébé's emphasis is unmistakably on earthy, organic eating.

"Our food is not just gourmet, although that's a byproduct of how we make it," says Svetla Kibota, the company's chief executive and mother of a 2-year-old. The Bulgarian native and sustainability enthusiast grew up on classic farming techniques that have long informed her sense of how food must be.

Kibota knows best, but this is not your mother's baby food. The difference is obvious even before one pops open a jar of Brazier's infant grub. The colors all but burst through pomme bébé's opaque, polypropylene containers. (The apple-strawberry purée seems the stuff of Haight-Ashbury flashbacks.)

"The main difference is that it's fresh," says Kibota. "It's the equivalent of a mom or parent making it at home, in their own kitchen. The benefits are tremendous."