

Food And The City

Text: Brian DeLeeuw/TCS Images: Olivier Lalin/TCS

“You have wonderful chefs, ranging from Thomas Keller to the hot dog guy on the corner – any one of those people is our competition when it comes to lunch or dinner. It doesn’t matter, especially in New York,” says Marco Maccioni, director at Le Cirque, one of Manhattan’s premier fine-dining establishments for over three decades.



The sleek and modern Aquavit.



Marcus Samuelsson, head chef at Aquavit, prepares a meal.

He is talking about the intensity – and density – of New York’s culinary world. “You might think that a guy in a suit and tie won’t go to the hot dog stand,” he laughs. “He’ll go to the hot dog stand.”

A few blocks uptown at Aquavit, perhaps America’s most fêted Scandinavian restaurant, Chef and co-owner Marcus Samuelsson agrees: “When you cook in a city like New York, you will always evolve because you are constantly pushed by your competitors, and that inspires you.”

Over at The Modern, the Danny Meyer-owned gem tucked inside the Museum of Modern Art, Executive Chef Gabriel Kreuther puts it even more bluntly: “With competitiveness, the quality gets better. This is a very fast-paced city.”

High Five for India



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so-called sabayon of pearl tapioca with oysters and sterling white sturgeon caviar. Suddenly, the city's most talked-about restaurant and most coveted reservation was back in Midtown and Per Se wasn't alone.

With Samuelsson at the helm, Aquavit has long been an influential force on the dining scene, but since the move in early 2005 to a sleek new space just off Park Avenue, his idiosyncratic Scandinavian cooking has only gotten better. Samuelsson and founder and co-owner Håkan Swahn now run a truly modern restaurant where clean, clear Scandinavian lines flow from the plate to the table-setting to the décor, creating a unified dining experience. As Samuelsson says, "People just don't eat with the mouth, they eat with the eye. By having an aesthetic that's very clear or striking, we get people more excited about the food." And this is food to get excited about. In the Dining Room, Samuelsson filters Scandinavian cooking through a haute-cuisine prism, resulting in explosive combinations like slow cooked salmon with morels, sweet pea-parsley

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But in the rarefied realm of high-end Gotham dining, this hasn't always been the case. The gustatory pinnacle of New York was occupied for decades by temples to haute-French cuisine where homage to European legends took precedence over innovation. By the end of the 1990s the focus of Manhattan food obsessives had shifted from the Midtown giants to downtown upstarts like Nobu, Balthazar, and Babbo, places not afraid to deviate from the haute-cuisine template, and the old guard lost a bit of its lustre.

Yet in recent years Midtown has had its revenge. A watershed moment was the spring 2004 opening of Thomas Keller's Per Se in the brand new Time Warner Center. Under the direction of Keller and Chef de Cuisine Jonathan Benno, Per Se's 15 tables offered lucky guests an indulgent nine-course prix fixe – a devoutly seasonal, technically flawless, relentlessly inventive New American feast that changed daily.

Over three years later, the excitement over Per Se's food hasn't declined – and nor should it, when you can get dishes as sublime as sweet butter poached Nova Scotia lobster, braised tripe with tomatoes and oregano breadcrumbs, and Oysters and Pearls, a



ABOVE: The cutting-edge decor of Per Se restaurant.

RIGHT: A table for two in Per Se.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: A chef at work Le Cirque; a pre-plated work of art; a braised tuna steak from the kitchen of Le Cirque.

purée, rhubarb sauce, and smoked quail egg and rare seared tuna served with scallops, beets, pea shoots, coconut-mustard sauce, and piopini mushrooms, while in the Bar, dishes like pickled herring, gravad lax, and calf's liver pâté introduce New Yorkers to the traditional tastes of Sweden. In addition to an aggressive pursuit of seasonal accompanying ingredients like rhubarb and ramps, Samuelsson's strengths lie in unexpected pairings: quail egg gives the salmon dish needed richness, while the nuttiness of the scallops deepens the taste of the seared tuna.

Such restlessness and passion also inform Gabriel Kreuther's cooking at The Modern. Since the restaurant's opening in 2005, Kreuther has taken a two-pronged approach that allows him to express his love of elegant Continental cuisine as well as earthier classics from his home-region of Alsace, on France's eastern edge. Nearly 60 cooks split between two kitchens service the formal Dining Room – with its stunning floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the MOMA sculpture garden – and the buzzing, chattier Bar Room.

Both menus are wide-ranging and wildly eclectic. New York's relentless pace and cutthroat competitiveness would



ABOVE: The dining room at The Modern restaurant.

BELOW: From the cellar of Le Cirque.

seem to fit a chef who says, "The worst thing that can happen to a restaurant is that you start to stay in place. Things need to move."

Perhaps no New York restaurateur understands this concept better than Sirio Maccioni, who has found a way to keep Le Cirque near the top of the dining totem pole for 33 years. It was in a bid to stay there that the Maccioni family tapped Christophe Bellanca as their new Executive Chef in January 2007, just eight months after moving into a soaring new space in the Bloomberg Tower.

Essentially Bellanca's challenge is to balance the expectations of Le Cirque's devoted clientele with those of potential converts seeking innovation alongside traditional preparations. (As Marco says, "Nine times out of ten, you ask for something off the menu, we'll give it to you.") The former home of superstar chefs like Daniel Boulud and Sottha Khun is in good hands.

However, this fall will be Bellanca's first big test, as regulars return from summer vacations and a new round of reviews hit the papers. And what does he say to all this high-profile pressure? "I'm ready," paired with a toothy grin. It's a response that would make any typically competitive New Yorker proud. 🍷



Fact File

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