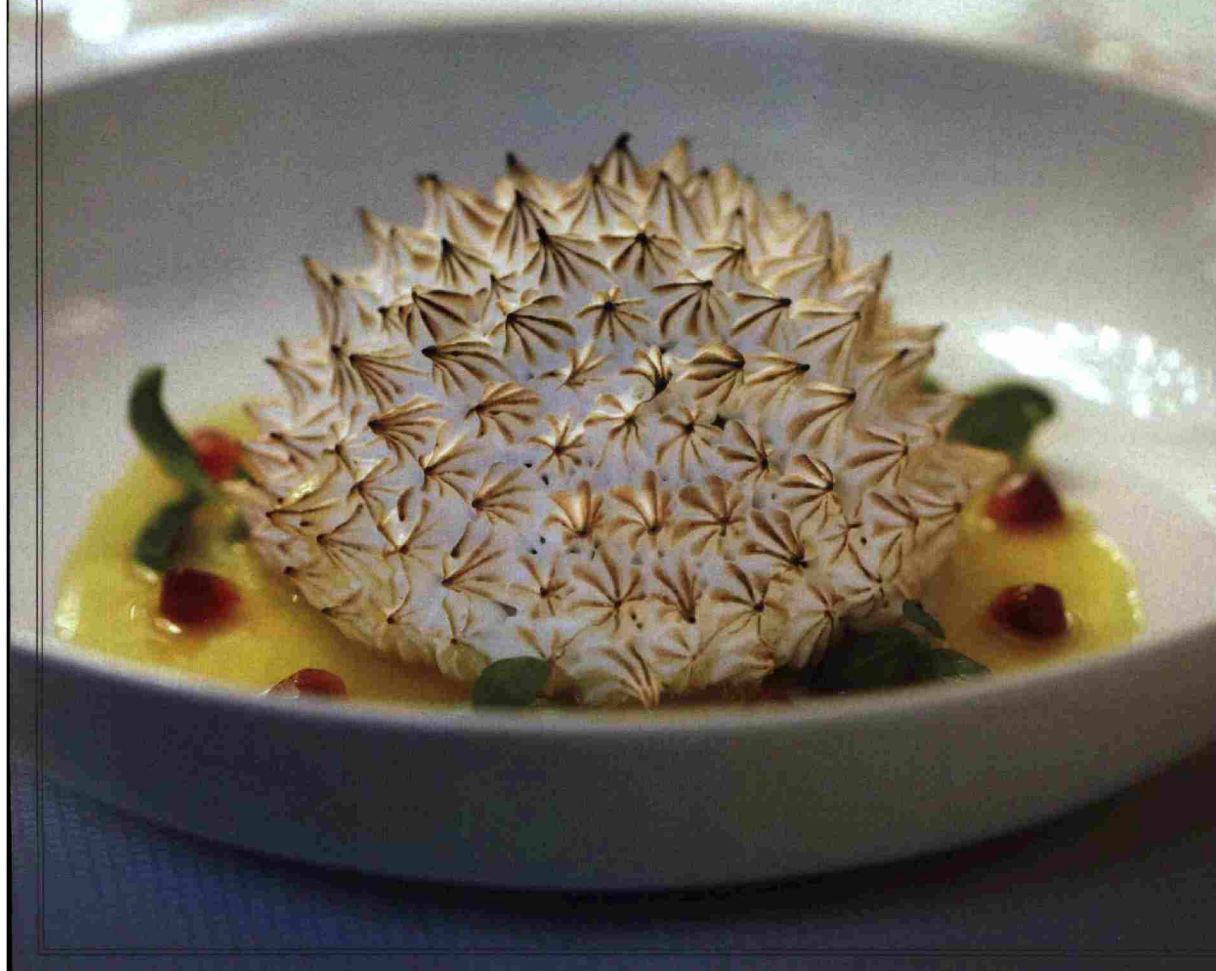


# TRIUMPHS IN THE PAST LANE

EVENTS & ATTRACTIONS MINING A RICH VEIN OF VINTAGE DISHES, INGREDIENTS, AND TECHNIQUES, A GROUP OF TOP NEW YORK CITY CHEFS SHOWER CULINARY GOLD AT A SERIES OF ARTFULLY TWEAKED, HISTORY REKINDLING FEASTS. CULINARY HISTORIAN MERYLE EVANS REPORTS.



This past winter 16 of New York City's super chefs were huddling in their kitchens with chefs de cuisine, sommeliers, and private dining directors, poring over some very weighty cookbooks. Checking out the latest from Adrià or Blumenthal? *Au contraire*, they were

immersed in their Escoffiers, Ali-Babs, and Artusis, developing menus for a series of extraordinary "Vintage Dinners" designed to transport Gothamites back to a bygone era when turtle soup, lobster Thermidor, truffled quail, and mammoth steamship roasts were familiar dishes on the bill of fare.

The series was part of an ongoing program of special culinary events fomented by the *Zagat Survey*. "I started thinking about the wonderful dishes that have not survived in our lifetimes," series mastermind **Tim Zagat** explains. "Large pieces of meat sliced at the table, different kinds of fish, organ meats, flambées. I wanted to revive some of the grand traditions and recipes that laid the foundation for fine dining as we know it today." His enthusiasm was contagious, and chefs from **Dan Barber** (Blue Hill in New York City and Blue Hill at Stone Barns in Pocantico Hills, New York) to **David Waltuck** (Chanterelle) signed on to stage, for one night between January and March, a prix-fixe dinner, with a portion of the proceeds funneled to charity. Prices ranged from \$150 at **Tom Valenti's Owest** to \$575 at **Thomas Keller's Per Se** (sold out before the menu was even posted). Some served the dinner to everyone in the restaurant; others opted to use their private dining rooms, seating from 20 to 40 guests.

To light fires beneath the participants, Zagat circulated copies of old menus from the collections of the New York Public Library and The New York Historical Society, along with lists drawn up by a cadre of meat, fish, and beverage experts itemizing what was popular a century ago. **Stanley Lobel**, prince of prime, whose father opened their carriage trade meat market on Manhattan's Upper East Side 55 years ago,

proposed that "the rumps and rounds that have fallen out of favor are less expensive than filet mignon and porterhouse; oxtail stew is unbelievably delicious, and when was the last time you saw chicken livers on a menu?" Terrapin, smelts, and shad were on the forgotten fish list offered by **Dorian Mecir**, of Dorian's Seafood Market, who found in her research on American cuisine that whole fish such as

planked salmon and halibut were favored over today's fillets. As for period potables, Beverage Alcohol Research, a sextet of top drink consultants comprised of **Dale DeGroof**, **Steven Olson**, **David Wondrich**, **Doug Frost**, **Paul Pacult**, and **Andy Seymore** compiled a list of cocktail and punch possibilities, though Wondrich noted that the latter had been the more customary pre-prandial choice.

Then the chefs took over, imagining what they would have served had they been leading a 19th century *brigade de cuisine*, but keeping in mind a sense of place that reflected the ambience of their own 21st century restaurants. The staff of each restaurant devoted an extraordinary amount of thought, effort, and energy to the planning and execution of the event. With so many hands on deck, the dinners turned out to be terrific team spirit boosters, and, as **Eric Ripert** of seafood-centric **Le Bernardin** remarked, it was "a great way to break the routine."

Ripert, of course, planned a seafood-focused menu; early American was a natural for **Michael Anthony** at **Gramercy Tavern**, while **Jean-Georges Vongerichten** chose recipes from *Gastronomie Pratique* by Ali-Bab, the pen name of late 19th century global gadabout **Henri Babinski**, whose book championed the kind of eclectic cuisine Vongerichten favors. At **Per Se**, where the aim was to re-



Opposite: The spectacular dessert finale at Picholine's Vintage Dinner, individual baked Alaska with vanilla ice cream and passion fruit sorbet, mango sauce, and a sprinkling of pomegranate seeds. Photo by Bill Bettencourt. Above: At **Per Se**, the private dining room was transformed into an opulent 19th century banquet bower agleam with antique silver.



Picholine's performance: A 75 pound steamship roast (top), wheeled around the restaurant on a cart and carved tableside by the chef. Terrance Brennan (above) plates reimagined amuses—deviled egg with caviar, escargot with Parmesan polenta, and lamb hearts and kidney kebab with a Madeira glaze. Photos by Bill Bettencourt.

create the feeling of grandeur and refinement of a private mansion's banquet room, **Celia Laurent**, director of private dining and special events, worked with chef de cuisine **Jonathan Benno** to match the decor to the mood of a lavish meal: rich garnet colored drapes were custom-made for the evening, Betteridge Jewelers lent silver serving pieces and candelabra, and Laurent sourced period

tableware, even finding etched glass sorbet glasses in various colors at a prop house. Calligrapher Bernard Maisner designed the menus, and a Japanese ice carver sculpted an oversize sturgeon to present the caviar, served by waiters in tuxedos and white gloves.

**George and Jenifer Harvey Lang** and chef **Joseph Paulino** at **Café des Artistes** kicked off the series with a deep-flavored reprise of *Babette's Feast*: Madeira scented turtle soup poured from little silver pots; buckwheat blini with osetra and crème fraîche; partially boned quail in featherweight puff pastry shells stuffed with a *farce* of foie gras and truffles and napped in Périgourdine sauce; followed by a cheese course of Comté and Roquefort with endive salad. The dessert, fresh cherry flanked baba, arrived with a basket of four rums for one's drizzle of choice. Throughout the evening, film historian Janet Farrell Leontiou strolled among the tables, chatting about the Isak Dinesen story on which the film is based; a DVD of the movie was included in guests' good-night gift bags.

Later, at **Terrance Brennan's Picholine**, Café des Artistes' Lincoln Center neighbor, diners were so bowled over by the 75 pound steamship roast the chef carved tableside that they were snapping photos like red carpet paparazzi. "I thought about the huge pieces of meat served at large hotels where I worked in my twenties," Brennan recalled, "but then I wondered, 'Will this fit in my oven?'" A trial run was fine, but the haunch ordered for the dinner was cut too low, and "we had to pressure the purveyor to send another at the last minute. Fortunately, that worked perfectly." The rest of the dinner, a reinterpretation of 19th century favorites, was easier on the kitchen. Amuses included an oysters Rockefeller shooter with creamed spinach foam and bacon bits as well as lamb's heart and kidney kebabs with Madeira sauce. Shaved root vegetable salad accompanied oxtail *en gelée*; lobster Américaine with leeks carbonara gratinée was presented in small cast-iron pans. When flambéed at table, individual baked Alaskas of vanilla ice cream and passion fruit sorbet in porcupine meringue with mango sauce elicited so many bravos that Brennan plans to add it to the menu at **Artisanal**, his sibling restaurant.

Classical roots with a 21st century twist set the tone for several other dinners. Waltuck updated "old school sauces that are seldom seen any more": *rémoulade* for fried whitebait, *sauce américaine* (white wine, Cognac, tomatoes, and butter) with whole red snapper, and almond sauce for blood orange/lemon *barvaroise*. At **Charlie Palmer's Aureole**, executive chef **Christopher Lee**, aiming to "keep the classics and toss in special things," floated bone marrow in roasted chicken consommé, accompanied a foie gras terrine with pickled kidney dressing, and replaced the customary lobster Thermidor gratin with a Jonah crab béchamel. Barber, having instant access to on-site farm bounty, added an embryonic egg to his roasted chicken consommé and presented Stone Barns own roasted suckling pig with red cabbage. Valenti, who recalled receiving a copy of Escoffier from his chef as an 18 year old apprentice, planned on oysters Richelieu, coulbiac of salmon, and, as a fellow offal enthusiast, braised duck gizzards and hearts.

Reinterpreting the classics, however, was not the order of the day at **Daniel**, where **Daniel Boulud** plumbed his large collection

of old French cookbooks to structure a virtuoso 12 course banquet. "Each chef was responsible for one or two dishes," he explains, "so everybody got involved and everybody was happy." As were the 32 guests seated at a single long table set with antique silver borrowed from the James Robinson Gallery, as they ogled a whole poached calves' head paraded around the room before its deconstructed twin was served with a 19th century chef's wish list of veal quenelle, tongue, sweetbreads, cocks' combs, fried quail egg, green olives, black truffle, and sauce Espagnole. A *chaud-froid* of Sauternes glazed squab breast was revealed beneath a burnished pastry dome, and a pressed whole roasted duck with Port/red currant sauce, turnip Charlotte, spinach timbale, and *pommes dauphine* stood out among several haute cuisine pièces des résistance. Boulud did deviate, however, on one course, substituting a Louisiana perfumed "trou Creole" of Peychaud bitters and rye whiskey with a side of absinthe granite for the traditional Calvados *trou Normande*, "because I really like Sazerac." Meanwhile, pastry chef **Dominique Ansel** supervised two assistants dipping caramel for the three tall croquebouches that accompanied coconut/passion fruit ice cream bombes, pistachio and chocolate "Harlequin" soufflés, and sugar-dusted fried beignets, *bugnes de Lyon*. "It was a choreographed ceremony of different flavors and show-stopping techniques, just remarkable," says *Food Arts* editor-in-chief Michael Batterberry, who spoke during dinner about the continuum of French culinary influence in New York since the days when emigrating French chefs fled the French Revolution and the Delmonico brothers opened their doors in the late 1820s.

Several of Boulud's colleagues with French rooted establishments similarly embraced culinary nostalgia. "We revisited hotel fine dining," said **Joel Dennis**, executive chef at **Adour Alain Ducasse**, "that patrons might have experienced at a grand social ball here at the **St. Regis**, with dishes for very special occasions." Adour's Parisian timbale of crustaceans, for instance, had been served in 1887 to Escoffier's friends at the Grand Hotel Monte Carlo (now the **Fairmont Monte Carlo**); an identical croquebouche had graced a royal wedding at the Savoy in London. At his eponymous restaurant, **David Bouley** offered dishes dedicated to French luminaries, including *anguilles de Seine à la Conde Victor Hugo*, *langue de veau à la Gastow De Foix*, and *croustade à la Descartes*. And at **La Grenouille** executive chef **Matthew Tropeano** revived such ancestral favorites as creamy mussel potage billy-bi, pounded pike quenelles de brochet lyonnaise, and *chartreuse de faisán à la Périgourdine*.

**Le Cirque** executive chef **Craig Hopson** and **Mark Ladner**, executive chef at **Del Posto**, waved Italian culinary flags, the former with a sumptuous medieval *bollito misto* dinner, the latter a February menu drawn from *cucina* deity Pellegrino Artusi's seminal cookbook *The Science of Cooking and the Art of Eating Well* (1891), published shortly after the unification of Italy, helping to establish a national cuisine. But, according to **Del Posto** co-owner **Lidia Bastianich**, his recipes definitely needed interpretation and updating. A sister member of Les Dames d'Escoffier, she invited me to sit in on a two hour brainstorming/tasting session with Ladner, banquet chef **Alex Pilas**, pastry chef **Brooks Headley**, wine director **Morgan Rich**, and private dining director **Jeff Katz**. After the meeting, "various

crostini" emerged as a tri-part toasted slice of baguette representing the colors of the flag, spread with tomato puree, walnut pesto, and a paper-thin slice of house-cured lardo. Artusi's cockles with egg sauce were napped with a delicate citrus sabayon. His hare pâté? Too strong, too heavy on the flour. So the hare was mixed with rabbit, seasoned with cinnamon, ginger, and cloves, and presented as a mini club sandwich, secured with a **Del Posto** toothpick. "Boiled chicken and veal with meat sauce" morphed into a poached chicken roulade stuffed with cocks' combs, testicles, and other innards earlier equated with culinary finesse.

**Bastianich** had bet that veal breast with pickled artichokes would be the favorite dish, but quail was also a contender. Artusi said not to eviscerate the birds. As today they arrive cleaned, however, as a substitute a pouch of juniper berries (which the birds love to eat) was inserted in each, with a string attached for removal at table.



Pike quenelles, a laborious 19th century delicacy, was a favorite pièce de résistance at Daniel. Stuffed with frog's legs, the ethereal dumplings were moated with a white wine/watercress sauce—an homage to the Haebertins of L'Auberge de L'III in Alsace, where Daniel executive chef Jean-François Bruel once worked. Photo by Barbara Alper.

And so the session continued. Artusi's savarin? It was decided to serve it warm, with a custard cream, along with semidried apples and pears. Wine pairings ranged from Champagne to Chianti and Barolo, along with two beer selections, a nod to the ancient breweries of Trentino.

For the dinner, a U-shaped table like those seen in Renaissance banquet paintings, was laden with eight glasses, six forks, and four knives per guest. Katz briefed his waitstaff: each would attend to three guests, serving food from within the U, drinks from the outside.

Katz would come out to explain each course. But to add a theatrical note, a staff captain costumed as Artusi would make a cameo appearance to offer reflections and anecdotes from "his" book.

Up in culinary heaven, Artusi, Ali-Bab, and Escoffier must have been applauding the performances. Back on earth, Lobel once again summed it up: "What a tremendous opportunity to bring yesterday back to today." ■