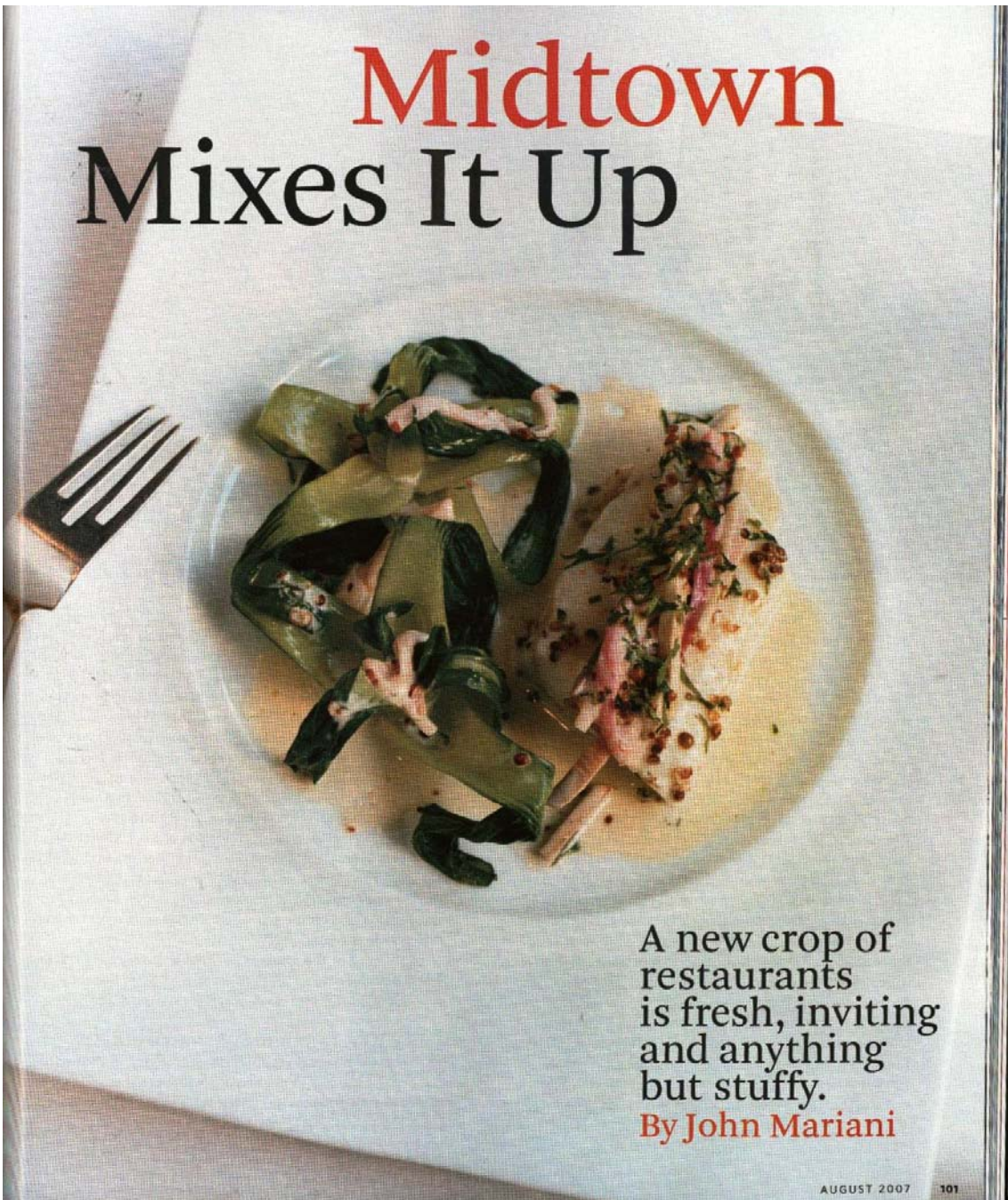


Town & Country


ESTABLISHED IN 1846



Midtown Mixes It Up

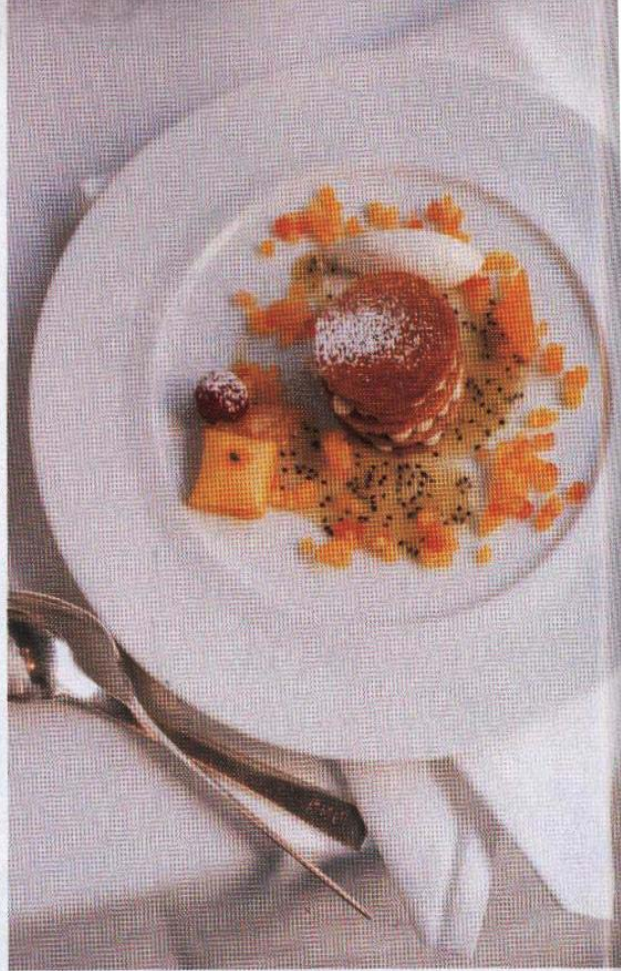


A new crop of
restaurants
is fresh, inviting
and anything
but stuffy.
By John Mariani



Gabriel Kreuther, the Modern's executive chef, as seen from the outdoor sculpture garden of New York's Museum of Modern Art. Opposite: A Kreuther entrée, Northeast flounder with fresh rhubarb, button mushrooms, wild rice and bok choy.

Photographs by **Christopher Baker**



WHILE the edgy restaurant action in New York is way downtown, at eateries with names like Momofuku Ssäm Bar and the E.U., for fine dining, midtown Manhattan is still New York's gastronomic epicenter, with a regular crop of glamorous new restaurants helmed by some of the most respected chefs in the world and given life by some of America's best architects.

Indeed, ever since the speakeasy days of the '21' Club and the move uptown, in 1931, of the Waldorf-Astoria to Park Avenue, Midtown has set the standards for fine dining, from haute French restaurants like Le Pavillon in the 1940s to spectacular theme restaurants like the Forum of the Twelve Caesars in the '50s. The power lunch began at the Four Seasons in the '70s, and even if the three-martini lunch is long gone, it is still in Midtown that top-tier executives in fashion, the arts, the media and politics break bread at noontime.

There was, in the '90s and after 9/11, a definite deflation of those often stultified old-line French and Italian restaurants, which closed their doors as their clientele died off, but those doors were soon thrown open again to reveal engagingly modern, readily accessible and more casual French and Italian restaurants that would rank with the best in Paris and Florence, along with sexy new Japanese establishments run with the same panache—and at the same high prices—as the most celebrated dining rooms in Tokyo.

Nothing, however, brought more dazzle to Midtown than the so-called Restaurant and Bar Collection at the Time Warner Center, when that eighty-story skyscraper opened at Columbus Circle, in 2004. The enterprise's gravitational pull and titanic financial resources emboldened big-name chef-restaurateurs to open multimillion-dollar restaurants that were turned from dream to reality by architects like David Rockwell, Peter Bentel and Adam Tihany, setting the bar for decor and fine cuisine as high as it's ever been in America.

Midtown hotels had to follow suit with their restaurants, with Joël Robuchon locating a branch of his L'Atelier chain in the Four Seasons; Laurent Tourondel setting up his BLT Market in the Ritz-Carlton New York, Central Park; Alain Ducasse moving into the St. Regis; and Gordon Ramsay putting a namesake dining salon—which has gotten very mixed reviews—in the London NYC.

These are not the kinds of retro-cool storefront eateries you'll find in SoHo or on the Lower East Side. But they are redefining the dining experience. Here are ten of the best.

THE FRESH PARADIGM OF HAUTE CUISINE

Per Se At the quaintly elegant French Laundry, in Yountville, California, Thomas Keller became widely recognized as one of the world's great master chefs. With expectations so high,

Old New York is reflected in the windows of the Modern, a restaurant that celebrates all things contemporary.

Opposite, from left: The Modern's sun-filled dining room, designed by Bentel & Bentel; a lemon napoleon with exotic fruits and *fromage blanc* sorbet.



Marco Maccioni (here at Le Cirque), one of the three sons of restaurant legend Sirio Maccioni, has long been an amiable presence in his family's dining rooms. Opposite: A tantalizing Le Cirque menu item, Icelandic cod with white asparagus in orange-galangal sauce.





Keller's coming to New York to open *Per Se* (the name indicates that the eatery stands on its own and is not a copy of the French Laundry) took as much gumption and money as sheer talent. The restaurant, designed by Adam Tihany, overlooks Central Park from the fourth floor of the Time Warner Center, and its fifteen tables (plus two private dining rooms) are booked months in advance. This is not a place business-people or society ladies go to for a quick lunch; even getting through on speed dial to make a reservation can be daunting. But if you do snag a table, it will be worth the wait.

With the ardor of pilgrims trekking to a shrine, guests come for three-hour, nine-course, \$250-per-head meals whose components change seasonally, weekly, even daily. *Chef de cuisine* Jonathan Benno may feature sabayon of pearl tapioca with Bagaduce oysters and Iranian osetra caviar; torchon of Moulard duck foie gras with spiced winter fruits; or butter-poached Maine lobster with creamy lobster broth and mascarpone-enriched orzo.

Though Keller is involved with other projects and is not always at *Per Se*, he and his staff deserve the three Michelin stars they've earned, which put them at happy parity with

their esteemed colleagues at the French Laundry, *Time Warner Center, 10 Columbus Circle; 212-823-9335; perseny.com.*

A CLASSIC TRANSFORMED

Le Cirque When Sirio Maccioni debuted the first *Le Cirque*, in 1974, on East 65th Street, it became New York society's darling for two decades, at a time when French cuisine, pasta primavera, ceramic monkeys and orangerie wallpaper were all the rage. The second *Le Cirque*, which opened in 1997 with the participation of Sirio's wife, Egidiana, and three sons, Mario, Marco and Mauro, was a yellow-and-red riot of circus motifs by Adam Tihany within the stately aura of the Villard Houses, in the New York Palace Hotel, and it drew a diverse crowd of New Yorkers and visitors as much for its superb French and Italian cuisine as for the people-watching. Now, at the third *Le Cirque*, also designed by Tihany, in the brand-new skyscraper One Beacon Court, the Maccioni family continues to run its restaurant with the same élan and three-ring excitement, which includes the inevitable arrival, through the revolving door, of a very celebrated clientele.

Tihany's dramatic, curving space for the dining room has eased wannabes' complaints about favoritism in seating, and the *Café* (which has a remarkably good three-course lunch for an amazingly cheap \$25) tends to become packed with young professionals once the clock strikes six.

Upon opening a year ago, *Le Cirque* took some time getting its kitchen and staff in sync, but with the hiring last winter of chef Christophe Bellanca, formerly of L.A.'s now-defunct Orangerie, its cuisine is again among the best in New York. The half-Italian, half-French Bellanca manages to balance *Le Cirque* classics, including lusty dishes such as osso buco and pot-au-feu, with his own ideas of modern cuisine, evident in dishes like a fat langoustine cooked *a la plancha* with Asian mixed vegetables and a coconut-lemongrass *jus*. Taking a novel turn on old-fashioned tournedos Rossini, he serves velvety beef tenderloin with luscious fresh foie gras and a mille-feuille filled with carrots, honey and peppercorns—a spectacular but simple masterpiece of form and texture. *151 East 58th Street; 212-644-0202; lecirque.com.*

THE NEW AMERICAN BRASSERIE

Café Gray When Gray Kunz was chef at the ornately luxurious *Lespinnasse*, in the St. Regis Hotel, he prepared daringly

complex French-Asian fusion cuisine. But at the approachable-sounding Café Gray, in the Time Warner Center, he has toned down the flash and focused his flavors in dishes that emerge as bright paragons of contemporary taste.

This is an exemplary modern New York brasserie—big, gregarious, a little giddy and, with its David Rockwell interior of mirrored columns and an open kitchen, even a tad kitschy. And it is *always* packed during preheater hours (Jazz at Lincoln Center is in the building) and later, when it attracts an eclectic crowd that comes to revel in Kunz's seasonal cuisine. You might begin with tiny, earthy red beets with assertive horseradish cream and a spicy vinaigrette. If soft-shell crabs are available, Kunz will have the fattest and sweetest, served with fennel-and-orange salad and a shellfish rémoulade. Vegetarians will swoon over creations such as his curried cauliflower-and-eggplant stew with caramelized pearl onions, while seafood lovers will delight in lustrous wild salmon with a crawfish étouffée. Lamb will be exceptionally tender, enhanced by Mediterranean herbs and spices, lamb sausage, pea tendrils and a garlic-flower cream. And if you decide you want to pop in just for drinks, the bartender is in full command of an array of classic and modern cocktails—a rare thing these days in New York. *Time Warner Center, 10 Columbus Circle; 212-823-6338; cafragey.com.*

THE ART OF DINING

The Modern I suppose it would have been *possible* to build a mediocre restaurant within the confines of a \$425 million restoration, that of the Museum of Modern Art. And, yes, even if the dining room, conceived with cool minimalism by Bentel & Bentel, looked out on the serenity of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden. But this is a Danny Meyer enterprise, he being the owner of some of New York's most beloved restaurants, including Union Square Cafe and Gramercy Tavern. No detail was left to chance at the Modern, where Alsatian-born chef Gabriel Kreuther is turning out food whose concepts and colors fit impeccably with its environment—which, given the restaurant's glass-wall view of some of the icons of modern art, means the baroque culinary flourishes are out.

Obviously, the Modern serves a considerable clientele from the art world, and the atmosphere tingles with a sophisticated bustle unique to Midtown. The surroundings are primo New York. It's a place in which you desperately want to eavesdrop.

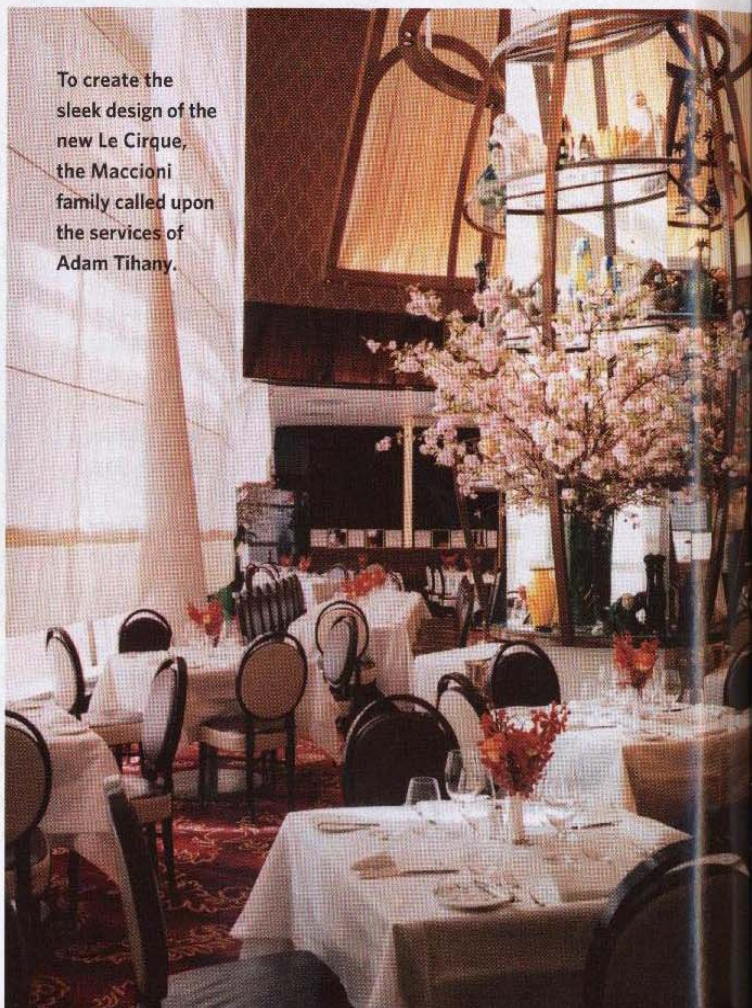
Kreuther's cooking shows European precision and Manhattan flair, as in his sunchoke soup with cured salmon, his roast pheasant and velouté of Burgundian truffles with millet blinis, and his perfectly pink and juicy squab, caressed by crisp pastry and drizzled with a caramelized-ginger *jus*. His chocolate desserts are irresistible, and since the dishes that precede them, while rich in flavor, are light, go ahead and indulge. *9 West 53rd Street; 212-333-1220; themodernnyc.com.*

GREEK REVIVAL

Anthos I'll make what I think is a very safe prediction: Michael Psilakis will soon be recognized as one of this era's culinary giants. He is already acknowledged as a chef who has thoroughly, though not radically, transformed the food of Greece by respecting that country's ancient gastronomy and wine culture while bringing them into the 21st century with a distinctly personal style.

He began this process at a tiny place called *Onera* (now

To create the sleek design of the new Le Cirque, the Maccioni family called upon the services of Adam Tihany.



Kefi), on the Upper West Side. Then, with restaurateur and partner Donatella Arpaia, he created Dōna (now closed). His new focus is Anthos, on West 52nd Street, across from the '21' Club. Anthos is a long, sleek ninety-five-seat room with perfect lighting and the buzz of people enjoying themselves.

You start off with an array of modern meze appetizers, like yellowtail dusted with fennel pollen and accompanied by ouzo-macerated cherries, or a plate of silky grilled octopus with a mix of orange purée and *tsakistes* olives with chicory and garlic. If you can get past the mezes, go for entrées that include baby pork chops and pork belly with a cabbage-wrapped dolma, grilled fennel and a light avgolemono sauce made with broth, lemon and egg; or a rack of lamb with mous-saka, nettles and a garlic confit.

Among the beautifully conceived desserts, by pastry chef Bill Corbett, is a lusciously sweet deconstructed baklava—pistachio, honey custard, and walnut cake with cinnamon ice cream. You may go to Anthos out of curiosity, but you will leave shouting “Eureka!” 36 West 52nd Street; 212-582-6900; anthosnyc.com.

FRENCH COUNTER CULTURE

L'Atelier Joël Robuchon After a short-lived retirement from Paris's Jamin, in 1996, Joël Robuchon has seen his reputation as one of the world's greatest chefs grow since he opened his first L'Atelier, in Tokyo, then another, in Paris, and now two more, in Las Vegas and in New York's Four Seasons Hotel. Robuchon took the concept of the American counter-style restaurant and gave it an haute makeover, but without the fussiness of French haute cuisine and its formality. The formula obviously works, as Robuchon's New York outpost won Best New Restaurant in the U.S. at the Beard Awards, in May.

The chef's New York counters, to be sure, are done in gleaming pearwood, and designer Pierre-Yves Rochon's polished wood and red-and-black decor is more refined than the cramped luncheonette-like space at L'Atelier in Paris. But the culinary idea is the same: dozens of small plates, ranging from traditional European dishes to imaginative bright ideas.

In the same spirit of freshening the old with the very new, executive chef Yosuke Suga prepares a collection of eclectic offerings along with several now-classic items, such as Robuchon's free-range quail stuffed with foie gras. The menu is set up for you to order three, four or more dishes, and you can choose from fare like lobster-stuffed turnip ravioli; a crispy langoustine fritter with basil pesto; lollipop-like frog's legs with garlic purée and parsley coulis; and, in an homage to New Yorkers' favorite sandwich, “*le pastrami*,” which comes

with very French foie gras. *Four Seasons Hotel New York, 57 East 57th Street; 212-350-6658; fourseasons.com.*

NEXT-WAVE JAPANESE

Megu Midtown As much as I enjoy the food at the vast original Megu, in Tribeca, I find it too much of a bar scene and far too loud to enjoy on a regular basis. So I was delighted when Megu Midtown, with one-third the number of seats, opened in 2006, opposite the United Nations, drawing an international crowd that comes to hash over the world's problems while enjoying exquisite sushi in an atmosphere as pleasantly civilized as the downtown Megu's is intensely frenetic. Yasumichi Morita's design of the new space—on two levels, like his concept for the original Megu—is dominated by column-shaped pendant lights that provide a warm glow. The service staff moves efficiently and with grace, and both the wine and sake lists feature reasonably priced choices.

Sushi may be the big draw here, as it should be, with marvelous examples of *hon maguro toro* (tuna belly) and other species imported from all over the world. But Megu Midtown also serves top-quality Japanese and American Kobe beef, in four different cuts, from a superlative tartare to morsels that arrive at the table sizzling on a hot river stone and are then flamed with Hennessy cognac and served with slices of Japanese garlic.

Most of the desserts are bland, but the chocolate truffles make up for that shortcoming. *Trump World Tower, 845 UN Plaza; 212-964-7777; megunyc.com.*

A CASUAL ITALIAN STAR

Insieme There never seem to be enough good Italian restaurants in New York. Some of the ones we do have are very, very good, but only a few are truly distinctive. So if a newcomer bolting from the gate wants to get noticed, it had better be special. In the case of Insieme, its pedigree helps: chef Marco Canora also runs the rustic, hyperpopular little trattoria named Hearth, in the East Village, and the design firm Bentel & Bentel (which did the Modern) has given Insieme—it means “together” in Italian—a strikingly handsome interior of weathered white oak and travertine marble, with intimate booths lining a wall and gauzy strips of linen that provide a wafting shimmer with the cast of futuristic film noir.

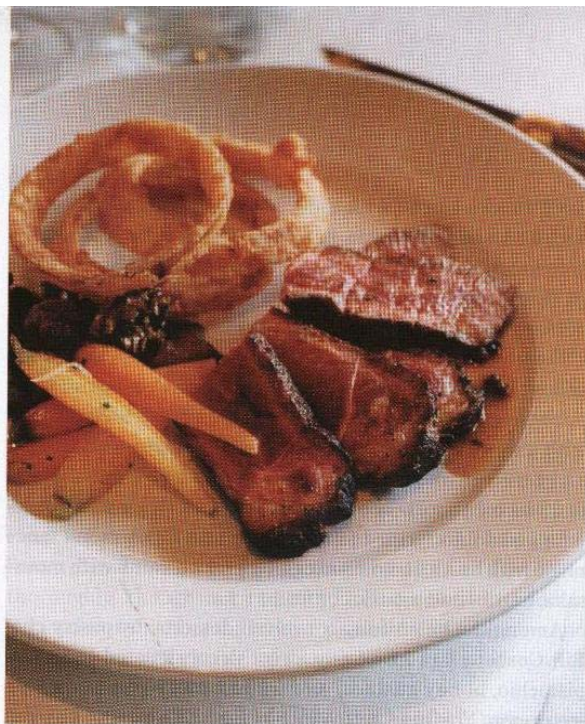
The menu is cleverly bisected: one side contains robust, traditional Italian favorites, like a tempura-light fritto misto of flash-fried calf's liver, sweetbreads, veal, veal tongue and asparagus; fantastically rich and complex *lasagne verde alla bolognese* in a creamy béchamel-and-meat ragu; and a *cacciucco* (fisherman's stew). The other side shows off

Canora and *chef de cuisine* Edward Higgins's more effusively modern approach: pieces of Wagyu beef and tiny ravioli float in a broth scented with star anise, and risotto is blended with Santa Barbara sea urchins. The chefs have sublimated the cliché of Italian cheesecake, making it light and tingeing it with orange, and there's no escaping the appeal of *bomboloni*—little doughnuts filled with cream—dipped in melted chocolate. *The Michelangelo Hotel, 777 Seventh Avenue; 212-582-1310; restaurantinsieme.com.*

NOBU UP NORTH

Nobu Fifty Seven It's hard to keep track of all the Nobus and other restaurants around the world with chef Nobu Matsuhisa's name on the doors, but in terms of size and theatricality, Nobu Fifty Seven is unique. It's another David Rockwell imagining, on two floors, done with dark corners and details of abalone shells, bamboo and terrazzo.

The menu tends to have all the Nobu classics that Matsuhisa's idolaters crave—the *toro* tartare with caviar, the salmon-skin salad, the "new-style sashimi" spiced with exotic dashes of chile—along with an array of tempura dishes and special main courses like squid "noodles" in a light garlic sauce, and Chilean sea bass with black-bean sauce. It's a big menu, but stations of cooks in the large kitchen keep it fresh, keep it good and keep it coming. *40 West 57th Street; 212-757-3000; noburestaurants.com.*



A PRIME AMERICAN STEAK HOUSE

Porter House New York Despite recent attempts by restaurants to modify the sacrosanct New York steak-house formula set decades ago at scruffy, masculine places like the Palm and Peter Luger, the genre resists change because its legions of fans love it just the way it's always been. Still, the new Quality Meats does good business day and night with the look of a *Sweeney Todd* butcher shop, while the ultraprincey Kobe Club, with samurai swords hanging from the ceiling, could be a set for *Kill Bill*.

But for a real touch of engaging posh, neither comes close to Porter House New York, yet another high-end restaurant in the Time Warner Center. Designed by Jeffrey Beers, the elegant eatery is roomy and polished, with well-appointed tables; big, comfortable chairs; an extremely cordial young staff; and a grand panorama over Central Park. Porter House follows the embarrassing flop of V, a quirky steak house in this same space, offered up by Jean-Georges Vongerichten. It also has one of the city's most respected chefs, Michael Lomonaco, who by mere chance escaped the destruction of the World Trade Center, where he was chef at Windows on the World, on the top floor of the North Tower.

Generosity, in both spirit and food, is the hallmark of Lomonaco's Porter House, with its lavishly set trays of glistening shellfish; hefty portions of fantastic French fries, onion rings and creamed spinach; and great slabs of the eponymous porterhouse steaks, which are among the best in New York. *Time Warner Center, 10 Columbus Circle; 212-823-9500; porterhousenewyork.com.*

✕

Michael Lomonaco, chef at Porter House New York, in the Time Warner Center. Opposite: The Porter House bar (bottom), with a view of the dining room; the restaurant's namesake, USDA prime porterhouse, twenty-eight-day dry-aged, with the eatery's ever-popular buttermilk onion rings.

