



## BANKING ON THE STARS

THIS IS THE TIME FOR SPLENDOR AT THE TABLE. IF YOU HAVE ONLY ONE BIG NIGHT FOR INDULGENCE, WHERE SHOULD YOU GO? A WHIRL THROUGH THE CITY'S FOUR-STAR ESTABLISHMENTS SHOWS THAT ALL GREAT RESTAURANTS ARE NOT EQUAL **BY JAY CHESHES**

**A** S A YOUNG CHEF in training, I would often hop the bus in Hyde Park, New York, skipping out on my stocks and sauces for a quick jaunt down to Manhattan. There, I'd spend a few hours wandering through midtown, peering into restaurant windows like a bride-to-be coveting diamond rings outside Cartier and Bulgari. I passed dozens of now defunct bastions of luxury dining (Lespinasse, the Quilted Giraffe, the Russian Tea Room), a few so exalted they had earned four-star reviews in *The New York Times*. And I yearned to settle in at every one.

It's been a long and circuitous route from those first Peeping Tom glimpses to the gastronomic heights I regularly experience today, and sometimes I wonder whether the familiarity has dimmed the thrill. I don't think so. Still, I like to think about the people out there similar to the younger me—folks for whom three-hour marathons writ in truffles, caviar, and foie gras are once-a-year (or once-a-lifetime) splurges. My holiday wish for these anonymous eaters, hidden among the expense accounters and tycoon regulars, the birthday partyers and anniversary celebrants at the city's finest restaurants, is that

not one of them leaves disappointed.

I saw my first four-star kitchen years before I would ever sample its food. In the lull between service, I'd been led by Le Bernardin's sous-chef through stations so gleaming you could dine off each one. We spoke briefly about a *stage* on the line, about the long hours, the punishing work—and the great rewards. For it was true, he said, that chef Ripert was a genius with fish.

*Clockwise from top left: The dining room at Le Bernardin; Daniel's chocolate pain d'épices; cheese and its accompaniments and bluefin tuna tartare at Jean Georges; Daniel's elegant salon; and Le Bernardin's seafood ragout.*





The praline soufflé at Alain Ducasse, where the décor runs to gold leaf and suede.

I never did work at Le Bernardin, but a few years ago I returned for dinner. Passing through the revolving doors from taxi-jammed West 51st Street, I was instantly embraced by the restaurant's soothing hush. A quiet reverence clung to the walls, as if the grandfatherly fisherman who peered down from the painting over the lounge would raise an eyebrow at an off-color joke or an inappropriate choice of tie. A table of Japanese suits examined their fish as the chef greeted old friends among the white-haired and pearl-draped couples scattered at tables shipping-lane distance apart.

I've been back many times to this most grown-up of havens, where Eric Ripert mans a kitchen still at the top of its game and co-owner Maguy Le Coze ensures that service remains gracious and familiar, never haughty or stiff. Classic, sophisticated, yet just modern enough, Le Bernardin is the Giorgio Armani of four-star restaurants, achieving without trying too hard and without any velvet-roped air of disdain.

Like the best sushi chefs, Ripert woos with a whisper—with *hamachi* tartare faintly dusted with wasabi *tobiko*, and nearly raw scallops adorned with nothing but lemon, sea salt, and chives. There are the requisite hallmarks of French haute cuisine—the foie gras, the rich sauces—but Le Bernardin is above all about the simplest fish. Gently pushing it over the top is the chef's ever-so-subtle globe-trotting touch: tandoori spices clinging to barely warm yellowtail slices, Tunisian *harissa* dissolving around gently poached skate. When he *does* do extravagant, Ripert



does it right. I won't soon forget his velvety ragout of just-cooked-through lobster, scallops, and clams topped not with a dollop of caviar but with a Hope Diamond-size scoop.

**IT IS JUST** that sort of excess I used to imagine when I was still an armchair gourmand, and it's what I found, from *amuse* through dessert, the last time I ate at Daniel. No luxury dining room is as instantly comfortable as this enormous salon, drenched in flattering light and outfitted with huge flower arrangements and whimsical lamps. On that Tuesday night, there wasn't a solemn face in the house—from the young Chinese women daintily picking at their warm madeleines to the Texas Republicans booming their politics through the room.

Still, service can falter when the staff is overwhelmed, and on my first visit everything had been slightly off. Dishes lacked polish; our waiter was just short of rude. A few months ago, however, Daniel Boulud shifted talent around, promoting to executive chef Jean-François Bruel, from midtown's *db bistro moderne*. The transformation is astounding, from the newly lavished attention to the now flawless food.

The first sign of good things reaches the table even before the menus arrive, a complex amalgam of mini *amuses*—*gougères*, crisp parmesan baskets, wee hummus-filled tartlets. For the full impact, a seasonal tasting—five courses, with two choices for each—is the next logical step. “May I suggest one of each?” our helpful French waiter offered one night. “That’s ten different courses. And would you like the wine pairing with that?”

Daniel is best enjoyed without any restraint. The wines poured with each course show just how dynamic pairings can be, from crisp New Zealand Riesling with light ravioli in a frothy saffron-infused bowl bright with ricotta, tomatoes, fennel, calamari, and clams, to the grand cru Bordeaux that complemented short ribs so tender they should be devoured with a spoon. It is the impeccable details—tiny, assembly-line-perfect carrots and turnips with sweetbreads and veal; fragrant black truffle slivers with Bordelaise-sauced skate—that define a certain type of unforgettable meal.

But there's another type altogether, which I've found in only one place in New York. Jean-Georges Vongerichten is the city's torchbearer for truly refined avant-garde cuisine, and he inspires legions of experimental young chefs with dishes simple yet soaring, on the edge yet reined in—finding that difficult balance where his wackier students more often flail.

From his flagship on Central Park West, this empire-focused French chef (he's opened four new restaurants this year alone) churns out some of the most consistently thought-provoking food in Manhattan. With its tall glass façade looking out on the park and its barely-remarked-upon boardroom décor, Jean Georges has none of the lushness of the East Side's Daniel. Its dining room is big-city austere, turning the focus on the twinkling lights outside and, more importantly, on the tables and the food. Whether The Donald has popped in from his building upstairs or a visiting head of state is hidden in a recessed alcove, it is Vongerichten's clean, vibrant dishes that are the real stars here.

A great deal of time has gone by since I ate my first meal in that room, but I can still taste it like it was yesterday: the delicate slices of the world's softest veal, with pineapple, spring mushrooms, and intense liquefied parmesan cheese; the caviar-topped cod cooked so slowly it seemed nearly raw; and the inspired foie gras brûlée, oozing beneath a burnt-sugar crust and served with a sprightly pineapple gelée.

At the time, Vongerichten had far fewer kitchens to care for and was said to spend most nights overseeing this jewel in his crown. (He peered into the dining room toward the end of the meal.) He wasn't on the premises the last time I sat beneath the crushed violins that drape

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the walls, but I'm glad to report that not much else has changed.

There's still foie gras brûlée, served recently with wild strawberries and a balsamic glaze. Flavors and textures are still all over the place, and even the oddest of them works. Fatty *kampachi* topped at the table with wasabi ice is at once soothing and rich. Silky red snapper swims, without drowning, in the tastes of Europe and Asia—olive and a hint of Thai basil. And desserts, thematic quartets by pastry chef whiz kid Johnny Iuzzini, are as much of a knock-out as any main course.

**T**HERE WAS ONLY ONE New York restaurant I longed to visit more than Jean Georges: the stateside debut of perhaps the world's most famous French chef, with nine simultaneous *Michelin* stars. By the time I pried open the wrought-iron doors at Alain Ducasse at the Essex House, the most highly decorated toque in the world was overseeing the most extravagant eating establishment in the city—a place that appeared on the surface to raise the bar on luxury dining, with décor and prices to match. Needless to say, my expectations were great when I sat down to dine in my finest new suit.

We began with Champagne, slim flutes of the chef's own cuvée, sipped in a parlor piled high with his overgrown books. The place is enchanting. Nowhere else in this town is as richly appointed, with gold leaf, plush suede banquettes, wood and brass trolleys, even perches near the tables where the ladies can prop their purses. The service is professional—not generous or congenial, mind you, but always correct. And the wine list is suitably huge, if geared toward the Bill Gateses of the world. Before the first bites arrived, the restaurant promised a life-changing meal.

But the food and its surroundings were never in sync. Simple John Dory with a lovely but muted lemon-thyme *jus* was nothing more than well-prepared fish, and pink veal with ham and Gruyère was an oddly pedestrian riff on an old housewife's dish.

Ducasse, a mostly absentee chef, has struggled to fill his banquettes almost from the start. Last spring he announced an unusual change at the top, shifting a protégé out and an ex-competitor in. With former Lespinasse chef Christian Delouvrier running the show, the menu has changed and the prices have risen

even higher. But now more than ever, the food falls short of its mark.

One night, even the seven-course tasting was a disappointment. As the last table seated, we were rushed through undercooked langoustines in frothy fish broth, dull salmon with sweet onions, and an abysmally dry hunk of veal. The food lacked excitement, but even worse was the apparent neglect—the long pauses on the counter after the cooking had been done. And the wine pairing offered no respite from what was far from a standout meal.

During long dinners, I often wonder what chaos is reigning at the back of the house. I've seen kitchens as cramped as office cubicles and swarming with cooks send out precise works of art. At Ducasse, through a window looking in on the stoves, it wasn't chaos I saw. Before dessert arrived, the kitchen had been scrubbed to a polish and turned dark for the night.

Where Ducasse has failed to deliver on the promise of new heights scaled, chefs like Eric Ripert, Daniel Boulud, and Jean-Georges Vongerichten are soaring as never before. And at this time of year, when the twinkling lights and holiday cheer bring out the children in us all, it's good to know there are some New Yorkers who can still make our wishes come true.

#### ALAIN DUCASSE

**Essex House, 155 West 58th Street  
(between Sixth and Seventh avenues)  
212-265-7300**

Dinner Monday through Saturday.  
Tasting menus from \$150 to \$225.

#### DANIEL

**60 East 65th Street (between Madison and Park avenues)  
212-288-0033**

Dinner Monday through Saturday.  
Tasting menus from \$88 to \$160.

#### JEAN GEORGES

**Trump International Hotel  
1 Central Park West (between 60th and 61st streets)  
212-299-3900**

Dinner and lunch Monday through Friday, dinner Saturday.  
Tasting menus, \$87 and \$118.

#### LE BERNARDIN

**155 West 51st Street (between Sixth and Seventh avenues)  
212-554-1515**

Dinner and lunch Monday through Friday, dinner Saturday.  
Tasting menus, \$90 and \$135. ☺