

REVIEWS

AND CRITICISM



NEW YORK: START SPREADING THE NEWS

THOMAS KELLER'S FRENCH LAUNDRY HAS LONG BEEN DRAWING PILGRIMS TO CALIFORNIA. NOW THEY CAN FIND RELIGION RIGHT HERE ON COLUMBUS CIRCLE BY JAY CHESHES

NEW YORK CITY can be hard and fickle, one moment promising the world, the next taking it away. But with Per Se, the new, urbanized clone of the most celebrated country restaurant in America, Thomas Keller seems to know just how to seduce her. He is, of course, no mere arriviste. After leaving New York in 1990 all but broken following the failure of his hot spot Raketel, the chef kept a low profile in L.A. before eventually

scraping together the money to buy a modest Napa Valley restaurant called The French Laundry. Within a few years, he'd turned the former stone saloon into the most fully realized restaurant in this country.

Keller's much-told story has all the hallmarks of a VH1 *Behind the Music* documentary—the unlikely rise from obscurity (he started out washing dishes), the breakthrough debut, the flirtation with fame, the inevitable flameout, and the rebirth in exile. These days, his

renown is unparalleled among Americans serious about food; reservations at his Napa flagship are so hard to come by they could be auctioned off on eBay. But even running the country's only true destination restaurant—filled nightly with diners who've designed entire vacations around a single meal there—was evidently not enough to fully erase

Keller's signature "oysters and pearls"—warm tapioca sabayon crowned with perfect osetra caviar.

unfinished business back East. It's as if that old Minnelli refrain has been twisted and turned around: If he didn't make it here, did he really make it anywhere?

TALK TO the staff at Per Se and you get the sense that—pinch me!—they've landed the best damn job in New York. As I waited for my table one night near the big picture window that stares out across Central Park, a young man approached with the drink list that he'd devised himself. "They call me the chemist," he said with the genial warmth of a true believer. Per Se's slim cocktail selection features some of the most perfectly honed libations in town, designed to awaken, rather than dull, your predinner senses. "They really let me go wild back there," he said, suggesting his latest creation—an intensely refreshing gin and tonic, made with tonic water brewed in-house with real quinine.

Keller's magic, both at Per Se and at The French Laundry, has as much to do with all that surrounds his food as with the food itself. Meals at both restaurants are just playful enough to take the edge off the fine dining experience. With a fairly relaxed dress code and a staff that treats all diners like VIPs, the chef and his front-of-the-house team have forged two truly populist four-star restaurants, places just as likely to attract middle-manager gourmands on an annual splurge as regulars from neighboring Ducasse.

Dinner kicks off with delicate sesame-flecked cones topped with salmon tartare; Per Se's bar is the backdrop for some of the most innovative drinks in town.

Per Se will never be as enchanting as its California sibling; after all, there's only so much you can do ensconced on the fourth floor of a glass and steel skyscraper, even one with such sweeping views as the new Time Warner Center. But Keller more than makes do, captivating diners, if not with the smell of fresh herbs wafting in from the garden, then at least with the same marvelous food, the same endless procession of exquisite small bites. You'll find the trademark raw-salmon-topped cones (or, for vegetarians, eggplant-caviar *amuses*) that have kicked off every meal since The French Laundry's first, the gargantuan sea scallops flown in from Maine, the superbly tender Elysian Fields lamb from a small farm in Pennsylvania.

Most meals go on for 10 or 12 courses, though if the chef is inclined to prepare an off-menu feast—as he regularly does for special guests—they can often stretch on well past 20. (Such regal treatment is available, at a price, to mere mortals who request it.) And there's something wonderfully symphonic about the way this food flows, from robust briny snails in a preserved Meyer lemon cream, to more subtle turbot enameled in a silky béarnaise, and on to up-tempo veal with crisp sweetbreads in a lively veal *jus*.

Keller likes to have fun with our memories of old-fashioned tastes. Many of his most successful dishes from The French Laundry, dishes that show up again in New York, take their inspiration—and their tongue-in-cheek names—from homey American treats. There's "macaroni 'n' cheese," featuring succulent lobster with mascarpone-infused orzo, and "bacon and eggs"—

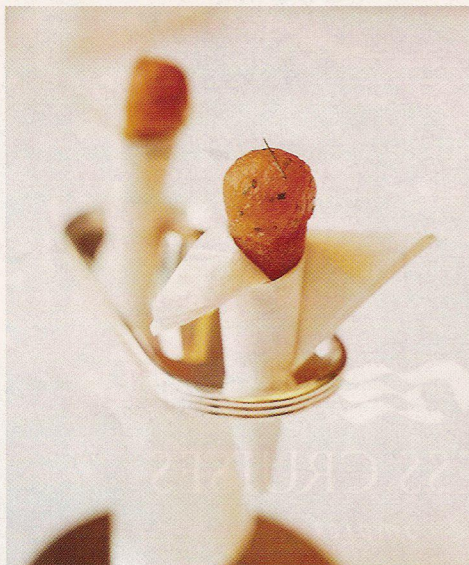
slow-braised *tête de cochon* with a poached quail egg and a rich *sauce gribiche*. The too-cute "peach Melba" (available only at Per Se) is really foie gras torchon, beautifully paired with pickled and jellied peaches and with homemade Melba toast.

Keller's food is so visually artful it might have been styled for a magazine spread. And though everything is lovely to eat, the menu is sometimes sparing with the luxury touches you might expect from what is likely a no-more-than-once-a-year meal. When the really high-end ingredients do make an appearance, the results can be truly awe inspiring. Foie gras is frequently the most generous dish of the night, roasted whole in one preparation, then carved into thick slices so featherlight they seem to have been aerated by hand. Here as elsewhere, Keller lets the raw materials speak for themselves, presenting the warm liver, in one instance, with nothing but sweet melon slices and a lovely quartet of sea salts. Black and white truffles show up here and there—in an astonishing custard served in an eggshell, in a buttery "pop tart," on the silkiest poularde—as does perfect osetra, mounded most often over warm tapioca sabayon in his signature "oysters and pearls."

But it's not simply with foie gras and caviar that Keller beats a path to your heart. His least ostentatious dishes are often his most accomplished. With a surgeon's light touch he turns soups and salads—designed mostly as bridges from one course to the next—into memorable side trips. Cold carrot soup, poured from a slim white pitcher over plump curried raisins, is so velvety-rich it caresses the taste buds like an ermine coat. And an intermezzo salad is an opportunity to sample produce so precious (including fresh hearts of peach palm grown in Hawaii) you begin to understand why the Japanese pay platinum prices for flawless fruit.

Keller has said that he loves most of all the challenge of spinning nickel into gold, of transforming cuts of meat many restaurants reserve for forcemeat into the centerpieces of a meal. Though often among the least popular options, these dishes—ox tripe morphed from rubber bands into tender ribbons soft as marrow, pastrami-like slices of confit veal heart served with heated bing cherries and Tokyo turnips—are well worth the detour.

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At Per Se the food is so fragile that an imperfect bottle of wine can mar the experience. The only logical option with tastes so far ranging is to let the sommelier lead you—from a perfumed Gewürztraminer, say, to a robust Viognier, and onward into less chartered waters, pairing Copain's rich Broken Leg Vineyard Syrah (available nowhere else in New York) with plump ricotta-filled dumplings, Austrian cider with chocolate, raspberry beer with sorbet.

AND WHAT SORBETS they are. The unsung hero of the Per Se experience is Keller's pastry chef, Sébastien Rouxel, who brings a surrealist touch to the finale of each meal. Work your way through such inspirations as a peanut soup poured tableside onto a wheat-beer cake and chocolate sorbet (a creation at once cerebral and delicious) and fresh thyme ice cream accessorized with chocolate, olive oil, and *fleur de sel*, toward the last tiny bite, a precious chocolate or three snatched from the tiered tray that lands on the table at the end of it all. (Like Harry Potter delving into a stash of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, however, explore these final confections at your own risk: Will that first taste reveal an acrid mustard ooze beneath its chocolate crust or a more pleasant surprise—Belgian beer, perhaps? Fenugreek or Mojito?)

Keller, it's been said, is the most European of American chefs. He has the temper (or at least he used to), the ego, the nearly maniacal perfectionism. He admits to having once harbored expatriate dreams, of *Michelin* stars and his own little place *en province*. The French Laundry—and now Per Se—reflect those ideals, of the chef in his kitchen rather than on TV. While food stars from elsewhere have made a run at New York, none have gone to the lengths this city deserves. But Keller is different. In his enormous new kitchen he's left nothing to chance, going as far as to shutter for a time one hugely successful restaurant so he could, in the end, open yet another.

PER SE

Time Warner Center

10 Columbus Circle

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Lunch Friday through Sunday, dinner daily. Dinner: Five-course tasting, \$125; "Chef's Tasting" (nine courses), \$150; "Tasting of Vegetables" (nine courses), \$135. 🍷