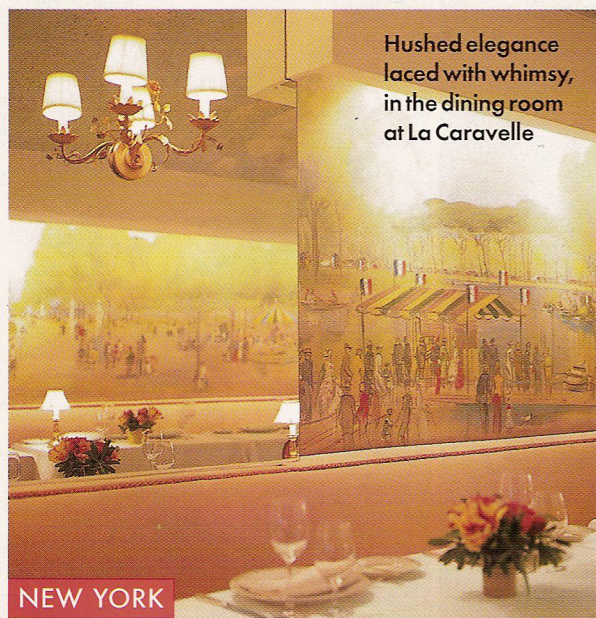


# As Time Goes By

*Only a delicate dance between tradition and change can keep a restaurant relevant for four decades. At La Caravelle, the waltz never ends*

By JAY CHESHES



Hushed elegance laced with whimsy, in the dining room at La Caravelle

NEW YORK

**T**HERE ARE RETRO RETREATS in Manhattan where you can still visit that gilded age of haute cuisine when luxury meant buttery sauces elevated with Cognac and Champagne, crisp glazed birds carved tableside, mountains of caviar and cured salmon—everything rich, abundant, fit for a Rockefeller. At La Grenouille, the regal midtown canteen crammed nightly with characters out of a John Cheever novel, the *quenelles lyonnaise* are so light they seem to float off the plate; the *poularde au champagne* is chicken the Romanovs might have appreciated.

A few blocks away, at La Côte Basque, another culinary museum piece, legendary chef Jean-Jacques

Rachou still prowls the dining room, overseeing the meticulous delivery of the same refined versions of Gallic standards—garlic-sopped escargots, meaty cassoulet, marbled slabs of foie gras—he’s been serving to New York royalty for nearly 25 years.

These stodgy relics—there are maybe half a dozen of them left in the city—are the imperturbable spawn of Henri Soulé’s Le Pavillon, the gastronomic temple that brought French excess to Manhattan in 1941. For decades, they have remained seemingly untouched by the passage of time.

La Caravelle, the clubbiest of these old standbys, is a different kind of fine-dining landmark. Rita and André Jammets, the European couple who first bought into the place in 1984, began flirting with modernity long ago, softening the formal dining room while enlisting ambitious young chefs to bring fresh, light flavors to the kitchen. Refurbished in 1991, the restaurant is now so bright and comfortable that you half expect to see Holly Golightly come tripping through the door, ordering a Champagne cocktail before splashing down on one of the salmon banquettes. The dining room is an oasis, ringed with pastel flowers, those unforgettable murals of Parisian revelry, and lighting and mirrors

described in a 1964 magazine article as so flattering that they turn “aunts into nieces and sugar daddies into gigolos.”

The Jammets know a thing or two about longevity, and it didn’t take them long to realize how hard it would be to survive on loyal regulars alone. While preserving much of the dining room’s old-world charm, they have made such bold hiring decisions over the years that La Caravelle—unbeknownst to those who have been ordering the same dish since 1960—has seen a sort of farm team of culinary talent pass through its doors. Michael Romano made a name for himself here before heading off to Union Square Cafe. He was followed by French-trained Japanese chef Tadashi Ono (of Manhattan’s

much-lauded but short-lived Sono), then by Bouley protégé Cyril Renaud, who now works for himself at the tiny Flatiron outpost Fleur de Sel. Two years ago, 38-year-old Troy Dupuy, an all-American lad from Louisiana, moved into the kitchen.

Now confined to the neglected real estate at the bottom of the menu, the untrammelled classics look particularly pallid beside Dupuy’s delicate creations: radiant sashimi-grade tuna layered with salmon; seared foie gras with pistachios and plump, astringent gooseberries; thick swordfish rolled in rosemary dust and topped with a seductively draped sea urchin crown. There’s venison and pheasant, and everything is enhanced by the subtle addition of unexpected flourishes—celery seeds, French Breakfast radishes, lily bulbs.

Dupuy, who worked under Gray Kunz at Lespinasse before heading south to open the Washington, D.C., branch of that restaurant, has infused many of his dishes with Asian touches. A sliver of Indian *pappadam* pierces a simple *amuse-bouche* of pickled beets and Greek yogurt. Roasted venison is bejeweled with pomegranate seeds and fragrant with a scattering of chrysanthemum leaves. That tuna and salmon arrives piled on a colorful bouquet of seaweed, the layers hiding the piquant bite of Japanese *shiso*.

**B**UT LA CARAVELLE’S OWNERS have also been careful not to alienate their core constituency—the long-time patrons who have been dining at the restaurant since the days when Joe Kennedy, following a public falling out with Monsieur Soulé, first brought his entourage over from Le Pavillon. Adalberto Alonso still tends bar—he’s been there since the beginning—pouring house Champagne (“It’s made for us in Brooklyn,” he joked one evening) or mixing his famous vodka-drenched riff on the Mojito. And though the all-male waitstaff still float about in their traditional black and whites, some of the formality has been abolished. Gentlemen can now leave their ties at home, and the waiters, one of whom greeted me on my third visit with a warm “Welcome back, sir, good to see you again,” are unobtrusive but friendly—openly chatting about the war in Iraq and the impact of anti-French sentiment on their clientele, some of whom had been avoiding French wine and requesting

PHOTOGRAPH: ANNA GROSSMAN

Italian water with their *poitrine de canard rôti*. (“We gave them Pellegrino,” chuckled Rita Jammet, “which is owned by Perrier.”)

It is a delicate dance La Caravelle performs. The old-timers return for the very reasons I would stay away—for the steady, familiar, absolutely unremarkable dishes the kitchen has been producing for more than 40 years. Here, the *quenelles* are like huge, dense footballs swimming in a *sauce homardine* of a viscosity recalling bad Chinese takeout. The Dover sole—a big seller among those who came of age before the Cuban Missile Crisis—is so drably presented it would be more at home in a retirement community for the rich. And while La Caravelle’s legendary crab salad—a simple mound of crabmeat tossed with chives and homemade mayonnaise—tastes just fine, the presentation, on a single lettuce leaf, is so antiquated you could imagine Strom Thurmond digging into the dish in the Senate Dining Room.

**d**UPUY’S INVENTIONS, on the other hand, are as poised as the room they’re served in—not so outrageous as to send the regulars scurrying for the door (you won’t find any foie gras with chocolate on this menu), but still intriguing enough to announce that Dupuy, like his predecessors, is a young chef worth watching. Perhaps the oddest dish on the menu is an all-vegetable appetizer, a confit of plump crosnes—the strange tubers that look like squiggly seashells—bathed in a warm froth heavy with vinegar and black truffle, all of it hidden beneath a canopy of braised leeks. The dish develops as you eat it—once you’ve processed the bizarre sensations of warm and sour and crunchy and bitter, it becomes apparent that the combination is actually delicious.

The chef has a fine touch with seemingly disparate flavors and a knack for pairing luxury ingredients with less exalted ones. At lunch, the waiter slides caramelized cubes of filet mignon off the skewer and onto a plate that includes a sprinkling of yam sprouts and half a hollowed marrowbone filled with a ragout that tastes like sweet-and-sour brisket. Lamb loin comes with a tiny, luscious tumble of braised meat that bears a striking resemblance to southern barbecue. Dupuy’s lobster—a big, pan-roasted tail and claws—lounges on a bed of quinoa, a whole-grain risotto of sorts in which

each granule has been transformed into a featherlight pillow bursting with flavor. And his *poussin* is a textural marvel. Gently poached to the consistency of silk, it arrives in a rich, foamy broth flecked with crushed sumac. At its side, a large, open-face ravioli, a dainty half-moon, hides a sumptuous mash of hazelnuts, sharp Romano cheese, crushed artichokes, and slivered carrots.

When it’s time for dessert, look backward; here the classics still shine. La Caravelle’s soufflés are among the finest old-fashioned renditions I’ve tasted—airy, eggy, dense with sugar. In short, irresistible. Pastry chef Jill Rose’s other confections are sweet indulgences, but how can a toasted-macadamia parfait or white chocolate mousse with peanut praline crunch hold a candle to a majestic Grand Marnier soufflé?

One recent afternoon, at a big round table in the center of the dining room, eight men with white hair, gray hair, or no hair crowded around plates of house-smoked salmon discussing something deadly serious. Monsieur Jammet stood at the front door, while his ever-smiling wife worked the dining room, catching up with old friends—two middle-aged ladies in pink business suits—and trying to make new ones. Despite the couple’s undeniable eye for talent and their ability to adjust to the times, though, I’ve seen no evidence that Dupuy has attracted a coterie of younger fans. One evening I did notice a thirty-something couple nuzzling side by side over their flutes of Champagne. I wondered whether they might be the first wave of a torrent of adventurous young diners about to descend on West 55th Street. They snuggled closer and pondered the menu. And then they ordered the *quenelles* and the very old-fashioned cranberry duck for two.

## LA CARAVELLE

33 West 55th Street  
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Lunch Monday through Friday, dinner Monday through Saturday. Lunch: \$38 prix-fixe. Dinner: \$72 prix-fixe. ☐

