


REVIEWS & CRITICISM

CALIFORNIA 33 ROADFOOD 36



Wylie's World:
An unmarked entry
leads into a dining
room of wild color
and warm woods.

NEW YORK

The Multipurpose Mind of Wylie Dufresne

At WD-50, the chef plays with his food. But do New Yorkers want to join him?

By JAY CHESHES

THE HYPE MACHINE that chronicled Wylie Dufresne's every move during the year and a half it took him to open his new Lower East Side restaurant foretold the emergence of an outlandish culinary universe—an experimental showpiece that would highlight the bizarre sensations and original flavor combinations perfected by the 33-year-old wunderkind and his crew of young collaborators.

While workers gutted the former bodega, Dufresne and his band of "Rough Riders"—as they described themselves to *The New York Times*—toiled away inside the chef's apartment, fiddling with blenders, dehydrators, and

a Magic Chef oven. They shriveled olives, braised vanilla beans, infused gnocchi with hot smoke. When **WD-50** opened, the press predicted, it would be the hottest new table of 2003, a wild place on the downtown fringe run by a sort of Ferran Adrià with hipster pedigree and muttonchop sideburns.

The city's food fanatics began clamoring for reservations many months before the much-delayed opening, and a popular Web site offered neighborhood gossip on the progress at 50 Clinton Street (including a message board with irate postings from neighbors and witty retorts from someone purporting to be the chef himself). There hadn't been such fervor over a culinary hi-

atus since David Bouley shuttered his original TriBeCa outpost seven years ago in preparation for his own much-heralded return.

FINALLY, in early April, the first uptown migrants began descending on Dufresne's new place, eager to taste the radical dishes cascading from the kitchen. But they didn't. The big surprise about WD-50 is how straightforward everything is. Despite the playful flourishes on the plate, Wylie Dufresne is, alas, no Señor Adrià.

The menu, written as an inventory of ingredients with no other descriptors, certainly sounds pretty imaginative, what with its sea beans, tangerine oil, and wood sorrel, but these novelty items barely make an impact. The most renegade thing about the list is actually what's not on it. There is no salad or lobster, not even a molten chocolate cake. The only luxury item in sight is a dense cube of foie gras. (Granted, it does arrive under a mash of cured anchovies.) There are no specials, either, and instead of bread you get a wooden box filled with paper-thin lavash crackers.

The wackiness comes in dribs and drabs—a smear here, a dusting there—that are so subtle you need to be told before you actually notice them. It's all snarky subterfuge, like those insider jokes embedded in *The Simpsons*. The shriveled olives make an appearance, crumbled like bread crumbs and sprinkled over an appetizer of flattened raw oysters. They're sweet and crunchy, kind of like brown sugar. A stripe of frothy foam served with rabbit tastes like mild, garlic-infused cream. It's made from roasting potatoes and garlic in milk for several hours and then straining out the liquid, a lengthy process that leaves you with, well, mild, garlic-infused cream.

But these odd innovations are hardly comparable to the near insanity prevailing in some kitchens across the Atlantic—Heston Blumenthal's crab ice cream, Adrià's vegetable foams, Marc Veyrat's coddled eggs injected (by syringe) with wild-herb purées. Roxanne Klein's raw revolution and Thomas Keller's deconstructed California cui-

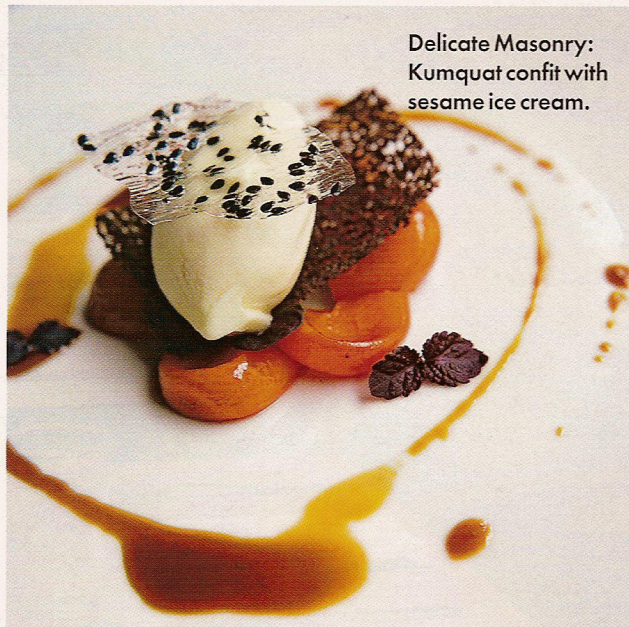
sine notwithstanding, chefs in this country are far more restrained than their European counterparts. Maybe Americans just aren't ready for food that's truly avant-garde. (Angel Palacios, who is one of the few American missionaries of the church of Adrià, has attracted heaps of attention for the wizardry he is displaying at La Broche in Miami, but he's had trouble filling his dining room since day one.)

Might Dufresne's hemmed-in, muted creations at WD-50 have something to do with the essential timidity of the

powerfully smoky bonito broth, but it is so drab I was tempted to ask for soy sauce. Beautifully fresh *daurade* is another snooze, though it looks intriguing with its topping of slivered long beans, almonds, and dried apricots. And the translucent sturgeon, served very rare alongside a porridge of pearl barley stained bubblegum purple by cabbage juice, is so tough and stringy it's virtually inedible.

Nothing compares, though, to the red-shrimp appetizer. In this misguided collision of salty and sweet, Dufresne splits hard-shelled shrimp down the middle and bathes the exposed flesh in an intense cinnamon butter that would be better suited to a piece of toast. Rounding out the dish, though hardly elevating it, are miniature, fried dried shrimp that dance on and about small cubes of a frightful chickpea "flan."

This is not to say that Dufresne's food can't be impressive, particularly when he mimics Vongerichten's clean, unmuddled style. His beef entrée—meltingly tender seared shoulder reclining on crisp Chinese broccoli and accompanied by a flaky bone-marrow tart and foamy sauces made from beets and shallots—is absolutely direct and perfectly



Delicate Masonry:
Kumquat confit with
sesame ice cream.

The wackiness comes in dribs and drabs. It's all **SNARKY SUBTERFUGE**, like those insider jokes embedded in *The Simpsons*.

American palate? Is it possible that his mentor, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, who is also an investor in the restaurant, advised his former protégé to walk softly into his brave new venture?

Whatever the case, the almost cultish following Dufresne picked up at 71 Clinton Fresh Food, his original perch across the street, has kept the place packed nightly. This despite the fact that the menu is a bit of a minefield, booby-trapped with dishes that are astonishingly bland or just plain unpleasant.

Fish is one especially low point. The monkfish arrives in a sweet, over-

executed. And his thick, fatty, slow-cooked pork belly is so tender it's almost liquid.

The refreshing, Nobu-style squid linguine—warm, snow-white lengths tossed with strips of Asian pear and bits of *serrano* ham—is a pristine triumph in its paprika sauce; the artichoke soup is silky and sweet. And the homey octopus starter, thick curls poised on a sort of German potato salad with grainy mustard, is deluxe deli fare you won't find at Katz's. (It is among many nods to Dufresne's beloved Lower East Side; his version of corned beef on rye, in

which slices of cold duck breast balance on rye crisps to form little towers, is less successful.)

Although the chef appears to be in the kitchen every night, the food that emerges is wildly inconsistent. Skate that's crisp and buttery one time is a soggy mess the next, its gnocchi sidekick downgraded from fluffy pillows subtly perfumed with lemon to leaden nubs so cloyingly fruity they could be mistaken for gumdrops.

Dufresne could take some cues from his pastry chef, Sam Mason, who previously worked with Paul Liebrandt at Atlas and with the late Jean-Louis Palladin. Mason's perfectly balanced creations are almost universally delicious—even the very odd-sounding parsnip cake with coconut and cream cheese sorbet. He pairs licorice sauce with bananas and caramel, candied kumquats with sesame ice cream, and citrus panna cotta with an ethereal grapefruit sorbet. All of it works.

dINNERS AT WD-50 generally start off festively. A playfulness pervades the dark, woodsy room, into which Dufresne has tossed whimsy like dried fruit on fish: Squiggly modernist lamps in bright primary colors hover over the booths; an abstracted Pinocchio sculpture greets you as you enter (which you eventually will, though the unmarked door means it can take a while); and bathrooms hide behind trapdoors in the walls.

The chef's goateed dad, Dewey, whose imprint is apparent in the quirky wine list (featuring such low-profile picks as Australian Torbreck and Greek Malagousia), circumnavigates the room, welcoming newcomers and the neighborhood stalwarts who go on about Wylie as if they, too, were his parents. Strangers talk to strangers; the chef peers out from his open kitchen; and the young waitstaff, dressed identically in denim aprons and workman-chic Levi's, gleefully offer to explain the cryptic menu—"Do you have a million questions, or are you just going to dive right in?"

Dive in if you will, but these are troubled waters.

WD-50

50 Clinton Street

212-477-2900

*Dinner Monday through Saturday:
main courses, \$22 to \$28.* 🍷