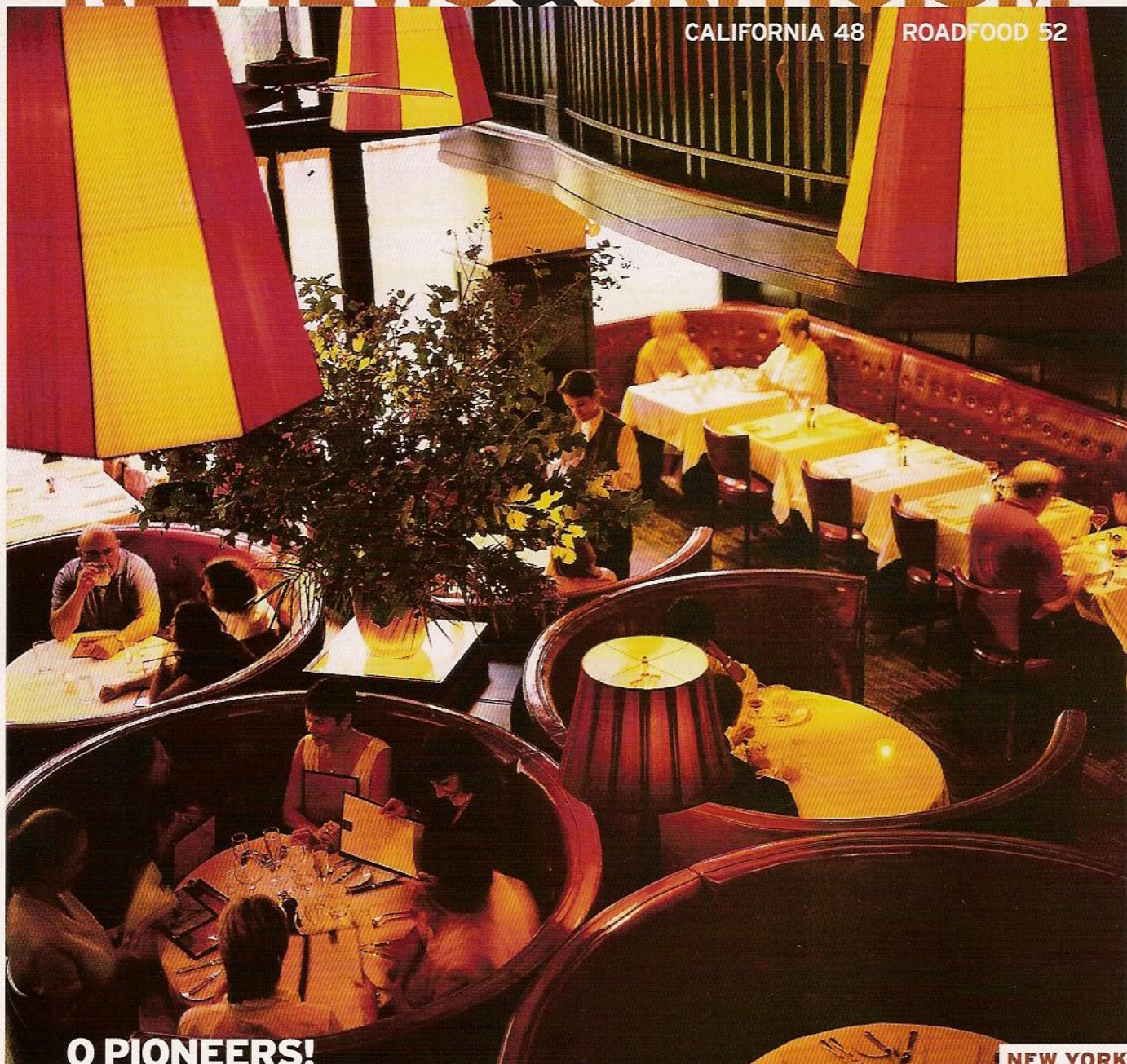


# REVIEWS & CRITICISM

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**O PIONEERS!**

**NEW YORK**

THE PROBLEM USED TO BE FINDING ANY DECENT MEAL ON MANHATTAN'S UPPER WEST SIDE. NOW THE TROUBLE IS DECIDING WHERE TO GO **BY JAY CHESHES**

**N**EW YORK BEGAN FOR ME on the Upper West Side, a place I knew, before I'd ever actually been to the city, from the big screen and the small one. The West Side was Woody Allen and Mariel Hemingway huddling in bed over cartons of Chinese takeout, Jerry and Elaine kvetching over egg salad sandwiches on upper Broadway. It was celluloid fantasy, newspaper headlines, late-night parody:

Columbia grad students debating Hegel and Kant, Sunday mornings snuggling over the *Times*, Zabar's, the Hayden Planetarium, John and Yoko.

Eight years ago, when I finally came to know the city for real, the West Side was a cramped one-bedroom apartment half a block from the projects, a spirited hovel on 104th Street with a roommate from the classifieds and a small window overlooking the community

garden that had taken root in the lot next door. Near my blighted block, there were plenty of grease traps where I could order pork lo mein and egg rolls through a layer of bulletproof glass.

The neighborhood improved considerably as you headed down Amsterdam and Broadway, past tidy brownstones bristling with newly minted lawyers and young families with children, but the restaurants—all-you-can-eat sushi joints, sidewalk-table pasta factories shoveling out generic penne à la vodka, and little Indian cafés offering watered-down tikka masala—never seemed to get

**Where it all started:**  
The clubby dining room at Tom Valenti's Ovest.

ANNA GROSSMAN

much better. No wonder Woody's characters always ordered in.

I moved downtown just ten months later. New York tasted a lot better after that.

**L**AST YEAR, I came back—to an area suddenly filled with intriguing restaurants and chefs whose names I actually knew. The transformation had begun three years earlier, with the arrival on Broadway of Ruby Foo's, Steve Hanson's upscale ode to a

so many West Siders spent their junior year abroad, turns out adventurous dishes like lamb with baked cucumber, and soft-shelled crab coated with poppy seeds. And last spring, Andy D'Amico, formerly of Sign of the Dove, planted his flag at the corner of 79th and Amsterdam with **Nice Matin**, his own low-key paean to the clean, bright flavors of the south of France.

These are the stars of the new Upper West Side, the kitchen vanguard who finally figured out how to make money

NEW YORK serving good food in this long-neglected gully of bulging burritos and hot wings in plastic baskets. Their presence alone is inspiring others. Recently, Charlie Palmer set up shop on 82nd Street, cloning the prix-fixe spot he opened last year near the Flatiron Building. Douglas Rodriguez has begun shaking things up at Calle Ocho, a sprawling pan-Latin place across from the Natural History Museum that long had an ambi-

**Aix men: Chef Didier Virot and pastry wizard Jehangir Mehta. Below, Nice Matin's fava bean tortelloni with sage butter.**



Chinatown banquet hall. A great leap forward followed two years after that, when Tom Valenti, a well-regarded veteran of downtown favorites Cascabel and Alison on Dominick, took his own big gamble west of the park. **Ouest**, the clubby place he opened at the corner of 84th and Broadway, struck a chord with its bistro fare and was jammed right from the start.

Then, like military scouts creeping into hostile territory, a small cadre of esteemed chefs began edging their way into the neighborhood. And suddenly West Siders attached to their taste buds began sticking close to home, scrambling for reservations at new restaurants that only a few years ago would never have dared take a chance so far north.

There's Didier Virot, whose year-old **Aix**, named for the bourgeois city where

tious, if sometimes uninspiring, menu. And early in 2004 the really big guns—including Charlie Trotter and Thomas Keller—will be breathing down everybody's neck, installed in the city's next great dining destination, the Time Warner building, nearing completion on the southern flank of Central Park.

You can see why **Ouest** made the splash it did. Done up in dark wood and red leather, it is bold and masculine—all Martinis and meat and big red wines. From his open kitchen, Valenti sends forth straightforward grills and homey specials like meatloaf and lamb shanks, frisée salads and beef short ribs: a steady procession of basic stuff done right. There are rich indulgences, too—whipped egg whites baked into miniature truffle-speckled soufflés, house-smoked sturgeon, plump *agnolotti* bundles weeping pale green sweet-pea purée, and, for dessert, a very mature ice cream sundae with caramel, nuts, and silken frozen espresso. Valenti is a comfort-food craftsman with a sometimes elegant touch, an expert backyard barbecue man searing duck breast a perfect shade of pink, filet mignon just black enough around the edges. (So popular is his food that he has just opened another spot, 'Cesca, a mere nine blocks away.)

**V**ALENTI WOULD PROBABLY sneer at the highbrow competition up at **Aix**. At that Provence-inflected circus, everything is splashed dramatically across oversize glass plates. Virot, it appears, has no intention of pandering to Upper West Siders with timid palates. At times the Frenchman seems to be on an experimental rampage, defying convention (and, often, logic) with wildly mixed results. When he gets things right—enveloping mussels, spinach, and goat cheese in a light cannelloni wrapper; perching slim sea scallops on top of red cabbage, fennel, chile, and lime; and pairing sweet lobster meat with garlic, smoky bacon, and corn—the results can be truly exciting. But there's often a ham-handedness to Virot's food, a home cook's indelicacy that's evident in asparagus-flecked parsnip purée prepared with all the grace of a vegan cleaning out the fridge, as well as in soppy, yogurt-spattered raw tuna served ice cold in daunting sirloin-size slabs.

Where Virot sometimes falters, Jehangir Mehta, his partner in desserts, rarely does, banging out not only the most imaginative sweets north of Jean Georges but also the most consistently satisfying. There is wizardry in his mango carpaccio—a paper-thin rosette of the ripest, most sensuous fruit, lacquered in its own juice and matched surprisingly well with a lime and tar-



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ragon sorbet—and in his very delicate Provence cake, a quiet marriage of almonds, violets, and sweet nougat.

Despite its shortcomings, Aix takes the kinds of risks I wish its neighbors would at least toy with. Down the street at Nice Matin, named for the morning paper from the city by the sea, the menu is so simple it might not be worth a second look but for D'Amico's deft hand with Mediterranean ingredients. All the usual suspects are there: fresh basil, puréed into a thick *soupe au pistou* or crushed with sweet anchovies and rubbed across a meaty codfish fillet; spicy lamb *merguez*, cut into miniature links and presented *au naturel* or with grilled sweetbreads perfumed with rosemary and garlic; baby artichokes, stuffed with herbed bread crumbs or stewed in olive oil and combined with creamy mashed potatoes to form a base for a crisp slab of sea bass. D'Amico boils bouillabaisse down to its most prominent fish, serving firm *rouget* fillets in a rich seafood broth. He stuffs *tortelloni* with luxurious fava bean purée, slathers *aïoli* on burgers, and puts it center stage as a dipping sauce for shrimp, salt cod, and pickled vegetables.

Things are changing fast, but for now Nice Matin fills a void that its competitors do not, delivering the kind of easy neighborhood spot most parts of Manhattan have long taken for granted, an uptown brasserie that's just inauthentic enough—with an exceptionally messy burger at the top of its best-seller list and a sommelier with the hard-sell demeanor of a used-car salesman—to remind you that you are, after all, still on Amsterdam Avenue.

### QUEST

**2315 Broadway**

**212-580-8700**

Brunch Sunday, dinner daily.

Dinner main courses, \$25 to \$33.

### AIX

**2398 Broadway**

**212-874-7400**

Brunch weekends, lunch weekdays, dinner daily. Dinner main

courses, \$26 to \$30.

### NICE MATIN

**201 West 79th Street**

**212-873-6423**

Brunch weekends, breakfast and lunch weekdays, dinner Monday through

Saturday. Dinner main courses, \$13.50 to \$24.75. ☺