

The New York Times

RESTAURANTS

Frank Bruni

Showmanship Yields to Elegance

SOMETIMES the best way to move forward is to revisit the past. Sometimes the loudest statements are the quietest ones, made without undue fuss, in precise gestures. At his new restaurant, Perry St., Jean-Georges Vongerichten circles back, shuts up and cooks, electing earnestness over irony, controlled flourishes over cluttered frippery. In doing so he gives fresh currency to his stature as one of the most talented chefs at work in this country. He also gives his doubters, who had grown legion, reason to believe.

For all his accolades and wealth, Mr. Vongerichten at this moment has something to prove, and Perry St. is more than just another potentially lucrative application of the Jean-Georges brand. It's a studied retreat from, and maybe even an act of amends for, the high-concept flamboyance of 66, Spice Market and V Steakhouse, the New York restaurants he opened between 2002 and 2004.

All three have their significant merits and pleasures — or at least the first two of them do — but they rely as heavily on the novelty of their overarching conceits (Chinese goes sexy, the steakhouse does sarcasm) as they do on

CUISINE RISING Dishes from Jean-Georges Vongerichten emerging at Perry St.

what happens in the kitchen. It was Jean-Georges the high-wire entrepreneur more than Jean-Georges the culinary genius who sired them. They have vacuous showmanship in their DNA.

Perry St. doesn't. This one is from the heart, not the head. And while it is undeniably flawed and surprisingly inconsistent, it's cause for

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celebration, chiefly because it marks Mr. Vongerichten's return to the straightforwardness of Jo Jo, which he opened in 1991, and of his flagship, Jean Georges, which came along in 1997.

Not since then has he produced a New York restaurant as tidily reflective of his culinary strengths and sensibility as Perry St. The expertly orchestrated interplay of flavors and yin-yang balance of effects in many of the dishes here are classic Jean-Georges, as are the clarity and lightness of his sauces and broths, which cast the stocks of previous eras as lumbering dinosaurs.

For much of the summer the restaurant served as an amuse-bouche a version of gazpacho made with raspberry, cucumber, red and orange bell pepper, ginger, red wine vinegar and olive oil, discrete beads of which floated like a shiny archipelago on a ruby sea. The sweetness of the fruit set the stage for, then ceded it to, the sourness and gentle heat of other players, which arrived as a second wave, a delayed epiphany. The transition and contrast were transfixing.

Mr. Vongerichten has mastered what might be called time-release gastronomy. An appetizer salad of frisée, goat cheese and pickled peach nailed a sweet heat that traveled a path similar to the gazpacho's: a cool front followed by a spike in the temperature, this time courtesy of crystallized wasabi.

But sometimes a single sensation slowly intensified. An appetizer of bluefin tuna in a fried crust of Japanese rice crackers came with a salmon-colored, scallion-studded mayonnaise flavored with dashi, sriracha and various citrus juices. The controlled fire sparked by the scallions and sriracha blazed stronger in the middle of each bite than at the beginning and stronger still at the end. But it never singed.

Roasted chicken rested in a broth made from chicken wings smoked with hickory, mesquite and cherry wood. The smokiness of that potion expanded with — and even within — each bite, and was cleverly offset by sweet kernels of fresh corn.

ONLINE Frank Bruni discusses Perry St. and Jean-Georges Vongerichten's restaurant empire: nytimes.com/dining

The restaurant's ambience is as pruned of needless embellishment as the food. Perry St. has been decorated in a sleek contemporary vein and a subdued palette of white, beiges and grays, neither of which competes with the charmed setting. Located on the ground floor of one of the new West Village high-rises designed by Richard Meier, the restaurant has views of the Hudson River, the joggers and cyclists on its edge and, at dusk, the setting sun. Imagine some palm trees in the foreground and this could be coastal California. It feels that fixed on a watery horizon, that luminous and laid back.

It also feels easy and easygoing, and in that sense represents another considered attempt, in these less formal times, to preserve the core pleasures of fine dining while jettisoning much of the ceremony and some of the expense. So there is ample elbow room and attentive service but only one type of bread and butter at the beginning, only a token cluster of petit fours at the end, and — an informality too far — brown paper place mats on the tables. It takes little time to peruse the concise wine list and almost none to absorb the menu: eight appetizers, eight entrees, that luminous and laid back.

winnowed options, there are too many disappointing dishes. An heirloom tomato and mozzarella salad was beautiful to behold but merely pleasant to eat. Steamed black bass was dressed in a basil vinaigrette so tart it suggested some kind of accident behind the scenes. So I tried the entree again on a subsequent night: still too tart, though appreciably less so.

Other dishes also varied from visit to visit, the ginger vinaigrette or poached lobster proving sweeter one time than another, the dill broth around a gorgeous crop of summer vegetables proving sharper. Although Mr. Vongerichten's condominium apartment is just upstairs on the seventh floor and he has been spending much of his time in the kitchen here, it could use more discipline.

But when Perry St. scores, it scores much, much bigger than most restaurants, and it scores on Mr. Vongerichten's instinct for flavor and texture combinations, his usually keen sense of equilibrium and of course his recruitment of traditions and ingredients from Asia, which seduced him before others.

He tempts yawns by including grilled beef tenderloin among the entrees, but then sends it to the table with an onion jam and a sour cherry mustard that was like a less zingy horseradish sauce, a less cloying steak sauce. It was just right.

In dish after dish, he let crunchiness frame succulence or thrust creaminess into relief. It happened with that tuna appetizer and with an appetizer of red snapper sashimi, the soft petals of fish hooded with strands of deep-fried snapper skin, fleur de sel, Thai chili pepper and lemon, which served as a counterpoint to a pool of olive oil below the fish.

It happened as well with my favorite of the desserts, a bowl of chocolate pudding distinguished by a cover of crystallized violet and a pedestal of chocolate sponge cake. Johnny Iuzzini, the pastry chef at Jean Georges, shares credit with Mr. Vongerichten for the last act of a meal at Perry St., a finish that was usually happy and never histrionic, much like everything that preceded and surrounded it.

Mr. Vongerichten has chosen a new tower of spare elegance in which to settle down — in more ways than one. He's back from the carnival. It's a welcome homecoming.



LESS IS MORE The design of Perry St. is contemporary, the feel relaxed.

Perry St.

★★★

176 Perry Street (West Street), West Village, (212) 352-1900

ATMOSPHERE About 55 well-spaced seats for dining, plus separate bar and lounge areas, in a sparsely elegant, hilling room with a subdued palette, lots of light and views of the Hudson River.

SOUND LEVEL Moderate.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Frisée salad with pickled peach and crystallized wasabi; red snapper sashimi; black pepper crab dumplings; rice cracker crusted tuna; crunchy rabbit; chicken in smoked chicken broth; grilled tenderloin; chocolate pudding; berry soup with Champagne.

WINE LIST International and relatively concise, with many affordable bottles.

PRICE RANGE Appetizers, \$10.50 to \$15; entrees, \$22 to \$38; desserts, \$9.

HOURS Noon to 3 p.m. and 5:30 to 11:30

p.m. daily, beginning Sept. 11.

RESERVATIONS For prime dinner times, call exactly a month in advance.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Entrance, dining room and accessible restrooms at street level.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN:

(None) Poor to satisfactory
★ Good
★★ Very good
★★★ Excellent
★★★★ Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

ON THE WEB

PAST REVIEWS from The Times, with additional capsule reviews by Times critics.

nytimes.com/dining

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