

The New York Times

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 19, 2006

Dining In

The New York Times

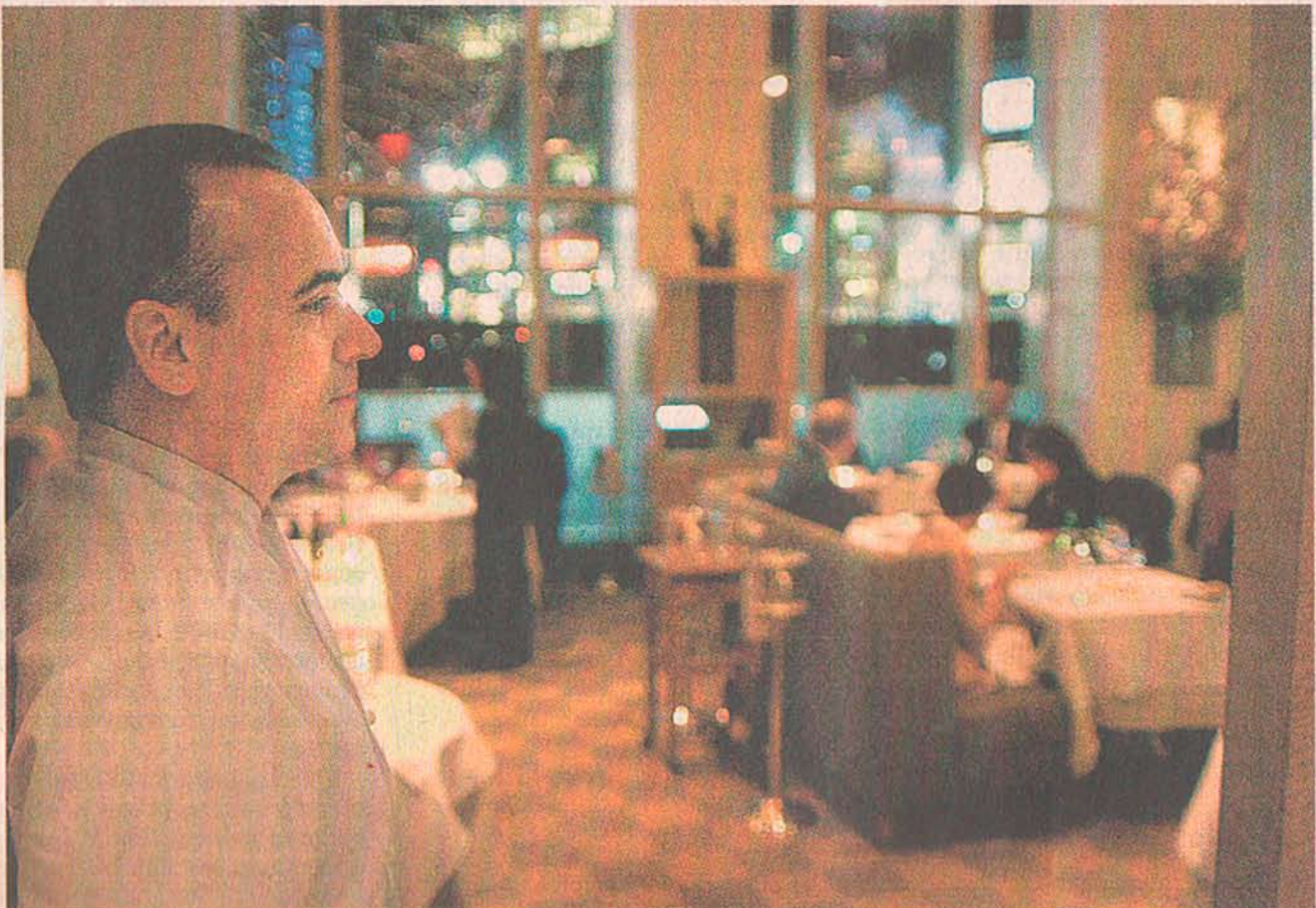
RESTAURANTS

Frank Bruni

Jean Georges

★★★★

The Steady Center of an Expanding Universe



Joe Fornabaio for The New York Times

THE EVERYWHERE MAN Jean-Georges Vongerichten, the chef and entrepreneur, at Jean Georges.

WHEN Jean Georges opened along the northern curve of Columbus Circle in 1997, Jean-Georges Vongerichten had only three other full-fledged restaurants, two in New York and one in London.

It wasn't exactly a modest portfolio, but it was certainly a manageable one. And as admirers applauded Mr. Vongerichten's new establishment — intended, and embraced, as his most serious culinary showcase — they felt no need to qualify their ardor with concern that he was spreading himself thin.

Fast-forward nine years. His reach extends west to Las Vegas, south to the Bahamas, east to Shanghai. It encompasses 16 restaurants, and the count would be higher if one of the three places he opened in 2004 alone hadn't been such a patently foolish miscreant. V Steakhouse disappeared quickly from the Time Warner Center, its rightful death attended by few tears but many troubling thoughts.

Was Mr. Vongerichten trading exacting standards for easy money? Was fame getting the best of him, and leaving the worst for us? Can an artist morph into an industry and hold on to the magic that made it all happen?

These questions inform any visit to

Jean Georges, and they have relevance beyond this one great restaurant and this one great chef, because his trajectory parallels those of so many culinary titans.

Dividing the attention he once reserved for the French Laundry in California, Thomas Keller peddles haute tuna sandwiches under a Samsung sign in the Time Warner Center. Wandering far from Babbo, Mario Batali travels the country to hawk cookware and hang with Nascar drivers.

Mr. Vongerichten's frequent flier account no doubt puts each of theirs to shame. So if the restaurant Jean Georges holds up, there's hope for all the others, and we needn't reflexively despair whenever we watch our favorite chefs speed from their kitchens to the studios of the Food Network.

I made my recent visits to Jean Georges with some trepidation, instilled by disappointing experiences at Jo Jo, Vong and other restaurants in Mr. Vongerichten's sprawling empire. That fear was tempered by happier times at Perry St., which he opened in the West Village last year.

And it began to vanish as soon as the amuse-bouches appeared.

A crab beignet was a cascade of sen-

Continued on Page 9

RESTAURANTS

Steady Center of an Expanding Universe

Continued From First Dining Page

sations. First came the coolness and gentle sweetness of strands of peekytoe crab, bound with béchamel, coated with panko, and fried. Then came a sliver of pineapple's more pointed sweetness and slight acidity. And then, fast on their heels, the heat of pink peppercorn, but only for an instant.

Mr. Vongerichten loves this sort of dance, in which one effect often defers so quickly to another that it seems like a memory almost as soon as it's experienced. He isn't seeking a seamless blend; he wants each sensation to have its say without overstating its case — to frame, tame and joust with the other players.

A parsnip soup that was served as another amuse on another night was laced with chipotle, the heat of which slowly intensified in my mouth but then receded as I caught the tartness of Meyer lemon juice.

There was brilliant choreography behind a dish of Japanese snapper sashimi. The lusciousness of the fish was brightened by the sweetness of sliced muscat grapes, which was in turn offset by a buttermilk vinaigrette's faintly sour notes. Mixed into the dressing or sprinkled onto the fish was a bevy of herbs and spices, including mint, tarragon, basil and Thai chili, each of which registered a fleeting, teasing impression. The proportions were precise. The results were dazzling.

In a fantastically nuanced dish of crisp-skinned Arctic char, different dimensions held sway at different moments, the lemon syrup beneath the fish briefly taking control, the caramelized jalapeño in a wash of olive oil around the fish insisting on a turn, the caramelized porcini mushrooms and garlic in the oil ready to fill in any gaps.

Many of Mr. Vongerichten's most distinctive dishes trade the richness of traditional French cooking for a different kind of intensity — for example, the earthy fragrance of chanterelles and shitakes that filled the air when a server poured a "wild mushroom tea" tableside. The flavors of this broth were as potent as its aroma, and it harbored unexpected currents: the saltiness of grated Parmesan, the tartness of lime zest.

He jettisons thick sauces and embraces oils and broths, preferring them for their lightness and for the way they release their scents, like the perfume of lemon grass that rose from a bath of Asian herbs and seeds around a delicately baked lobster tartine.

It's a dish he has been doing for quite some time, and Jean Georges's detractors complain that the restaurant is bereft of fresh ideas. They say that nothing happening here today — not the studied deployment of a world's worth of spices; not the focus



Joe Fornabain for The New York Times

WHAT A HYPHEN CAN DO Jean Georges opened in 1997 as Jean-Georges Vongerichten's showcase restaurant.

on smell; not the calibration of sweetness, tartness and heat — represents a significant advancement of what was happening at the start, when the restaurant received four stars from Ruth Reichl in The New York Times.

True enough. But while the food at Jean Georges may no longer be novel, it still thrills, and this restaurant still presents an experience unlike others around town. Mr. Vongerichten may not be spending as many hours in its kitchen as he once did, but the team he has put in place — led by Mark Lapico, the chef de cuisine — masterfully executes timeless recipes that have little margin for error.

There was a riveting precariousness to the equilibrium of some dishes. An initial bite of caramelized sweetbreads with a chestnut glaze and shavings of black truffle was slightly cloying. But a subsequent bite, with more truffle, was exquisite. From then on I took greater care with each forkful, determined to make it count.

A goat cheese royale commanded similar focus. It was layered horizontally with a beet marmalade and a band of roasted Sicilian pistachios: white, red and green. Too much of any one stripe meant a richness or a nuttiness out of whack. So I made sure the colors mingled thoroughly, and the effort paid off.

Eating is seldom this absorbing, this bracing. To lend needed excitement to beef tenderloin, some foie gras had been placed on top. But the crucial, less predictable flourish was a rhabarb foam on top of that. It cut the fattiness of the liver. It snapped the palate to attention. So did a wedge of cured lemon that was strategically placed alongside broiled squab and foie gras in another dish.

Sometimes Mr. Vongerichten's tendency to issue tart wake-up calls went too far. The dressing for a dish of raw bluefin tuna, avocado and radishes tasted too strongly of vinegar.

Jean Georges

★★★★

Trump International Hotel and Tower,
1 Central Park West; (212) 299-3900.

ATMOSPHERE Big windows, light and a subdued, neutral palette give it an airiness that most fancy restaurants do not have.

SOUND LEVEL Moderate.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Wild mushroom tea; Japanese snapper sashimi; hamachi carpaccio; young garlic soup with frogs' legs; goat cheese royale; turbot with Château-Chalon sauce; Arctic char with porcini and garlic; broiled squab; duck with cracked almonds; molten chocolate cake; chocolate sorbet; mango lassi with carrot froth.

WINE LIST Extensive, international and mostly expensive, with a concentration on France, dozens of bottles under \$75 and well-chosen wines by the glass.

PRICE RANGE Two-course lunch prix fixe, not including dessert, \$28; dessert, \$8. Four-course dinner prix fixe, including dessert, \$95. Seven-course tasting menus, \$125.

HOURS Lunch from noon to 2:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. Dinner from 5:30

to 11 p.m. Monday through Thursday; from 5:15 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday; closed on Sunday.

RESERVATIONS For prime dinner times, call at least three weeks in advance.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Separate entrance on corner of West 61st Street has elevator to restaurant. Dining room and accessible restroom on one 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

Sometimes he erred on the side of sweetness. He let mango run roughshod over butter-poached lobster, the flesh of which was sweet enough.

But those are minor quibbles, and so is this: The presentation of dessert at Jean Georges feels gimmicky. A diner chooses a theme (chocolate, for example, or citrus or honey-nut) and out comes a square plate with four chambers containing four meditations on the theme. Each of these desserts-within-desserts is plenty complicated on its own, a testament to the ambition and creativity of the pastry chef, Johnny Iuzzini. Taken together, they're overkill.

But they signal a playfulness and a give-good-value populism that are central to Jean Georges's special niche. After all these years, it remains the most relaxed of New York's premier French restaurants, providing the requisite petits fours

without the usual pompousness, the epic wine list without the oppressive décor.

The service carts are so small and simple they're barely noticeable. Servers have subdued demeanors that tilt more often toward aloofness (something Mr. Vongerichten needs to monitor) than toward obsequiousness. The dining room's big windows, Central Park glimpses and unobtrusive palette of beiges and grays give it an airiness that other fancy restaurants don't have.

That ambience complements the cleanliness of much of the cooking. It suits and serves the goal of accessible elegance, of classic French indulgence with a contemporary flair. Jean Georges was built on a coherent vision, smart decisions and earnest execution. Those qualities may be missing elsewhere in the Vongerichten empire, but they're still here.

RESTAURANT
GUIDE

MIDTOWN WEST

Korean
HANBAT RESTAURANT
Open 24 Hrs Daily, Reasonable Prices
53 W. 35 St./6 Ave. 212-629-5588

Bistro French
LE BIARRITZ
Lunch Tues-Fri/Dinner Tues-Sun
325 W. 57 St. 212-757-2390

TRIBECA/SOHO

THALASSA Restaurant
179 Franklin 212-641-7661
Traditional GREEK Entree-LIVE MUSIC
Sunday 23 April, 1-10pm

Classic photographs,
commemorative
reprints, books,
posters, collectibles
and more at
The New York Times
online store.

The New York Times
nytimes.com

A BEST cuph
perfect
and a friend,
a two-wom
On that of
services to
owners and
hers here in
ral Colorado
sing instruc
do the shop
king off, Me
is his wait-

WHY
THE N
To
and to l



Sign up for hon

Call 1-877-TIMES

or visit nytin

the need to

The New

For the first 12 weeks of Monday-Friday delivery when you
The New York Times Delivery Service used by readers who
At the end of the introductory period, service will cost
subscription. Your credit card will automatically be charged
For non-credit card subscribers, our regular introductory is

Diner's Journal
BY FRANK BRUNI

A blog on restaurants, trends
and notes from the field, in-
cluding a look at tapas and the
new restaurant Dona:
nytimes.com/dinersjournal.