



FOOD

NEW YORK, NEW FORK

Cantonese cacio e pepe, Rajasthani rabbit feasts and vodka fish and chips... The latest flavours of the Big Apple are a riot, says *Jay Cheshes*

Top: Calvin Eng, chef at Bonnie's in Williamsburg, who serves up modern Cantonese-American dishes, such as (left, from top right) fuyu cacio e pepe mein, cha siu McRib, wun tun en brodo, tinned dace fish dip, bak chit gai and gergn jook. Right: Laser Wolf's guava chicken shishlik, smoked beets with dukkah, and Bulgarian kebab served with grilled onions and tehina



Above: the interior of Dhamaka and (left) its doh kheh. Bottom: Patricia Howard and Ed Szymanski, owners of Dame, and (below) its fish and chips

PHOTOGRAPHS: ADAM FRIEDLANDER, ALEX LAU, BRIC MIDSKER, EVAN SUNG (2), LIE CLAYMAN, MICHAEL PERCIC, NONI FEIGS, PAUL VICKDOUGHN, WILL ELLIS

At Bonnie's, the only restaurant in New York focused on modern Cantonese-American cooking, which opened in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn in December, bartenders shake up MSG Martinis that are among the world's briniest cocktails and a perfect foil for chef Calvin Eng's extra tender salt-and-pepper squid served with a "Chinese Ranch" dipping sauce and more MSG. "We love MSG here," says Eng. "It's in everything, almost."

For the chef's beautiful, elegant whole trout, the flesh is whipped with shrimp and water chestnuts, then stuffed under its burnished skin. Eng, who grew up exploring New York's Chinatown, uses the subtle flavours of his ancestral Guangdong Province as the launching pad for his creative cooking. "It's my interpretation of what Cantonese food can be," he says.

It's been a while since New York has had dynamic new restaurants such as Bonnie's, part of a new wave of auteur operations shaking up the dining scene, taking advantage of restaurant and real-estate markets in flux, and serving food their chefs want to eat. New openings, too often hamstrung by economics, have typically had to play it safe. Now, as New York emerges from this punishing pandemic, passion projects like Bonnie's, exploring new flavour profiles, are turning the city into an awfully exciting place to eat.

Eng's restaurant, named after his mother, forges unlikely connections with Italy, serving miniature shrimp and fish wontons *en brodo* and a super-savoury spin on cacio e pepe pasta, with fermented bean curd added to parmesan and romano. "I compare Cantonese food to Italian food all the time," he says. "In both cuisines it's really umami-forward and about allowing the main ingredients to shine."

There are similar success stories across the city, as New York roars back to life. At Dhamaka, the wildly popular Indian restaurant that opened on Manhattan's Lower East Side last year, chef Chintan Pandya takes an anthropological approach to his country's cooking, highlighting dishes rarely, if ever, served in restaurants, even in India. The food ranges across the country's northern half – from urban street stalls to rural villages to mother-in-law dining rooms – with no tikka masalas, vindaloos or

Luxe bar revival



- THE NINES**
Downtown piano bar and supper club (above)
- TEMPLE BAR**
Refurbished and reopened under new owners
- MELODY'S**
Uptown piano bar
- PEBBLE BAR**
New multistorey hot scene in midtown



samosas in sight. "Many roads converge at Dhamaka," says Pandya's partner, restaurateur Roni Mazumdar. "Under-represented regions of India, ingredients that are humble yet deeply flavourful, techniques that only resided in our homes."

Pandya's Paplet fry – crispy pomfret cloaked in an irresistible spice blend – is a classic bar snack in his native Mumbai, generally served with Indian whisky. His dogfish curry comes from the Bengali coast. His goat kidneys and testicles in goat-trotter gravy – traditional Muslim street food for spooning on buttery *pao* buns – isn't a dare but a must-order (even for the offal-averse). The restaurant sells only one portion a night of its order-way-ahead whole rabbit feast, a Rajasthani hunting speciality, marinated for 48 hours then slow-cooked for six more. The original hope was to roast the rabbit in the traditional way, buried under charcoal. "Unfortunately the rules in New York City are so weird we couldn't have a pit inside the kitchen," says Pandya.

Dhamaka means party, a blast, which the restaurant embodies from its bold flavours to its bright murals and high-octane music. "It's meant to be big, loud, in your face," says Pandya. After the success of their second restaurant, Adda Indian Canteen, the partners renamed their restaurant group Unapologetic Foods, telegraphing their dedication to unfettered Indian cooking. "I think it's time to stop apologising to the world: 'our food's a little spicy, let me change it for you'; 'our food has a little extra oil sometimes' – it does, it's part of our cuisine," says Mazumdar.

Last fall they opened a new restaurant, Semma, in the West Village, importing a chef from California, Vijay Kumar, a native of Tamil Nadu in the far south of India, who'd been cooking at a contemporary Indian restaurant outside San Francisco. "We were not truly ourselves," says Kumar, of his last job. "Why couldn't we serve what we grew up eating?"

With its jungle murals and traditional bamboo mats on the ceiling, Semma conjures India's tropical regions, the focus of Kumar's incendiary, coconut-tinged cooking. The chef was raised on a rice farm where his family grew their own produce and fished and foraged for ingredients. His menu features snails from New York's Peconic Bay simmered in the rich gravy of his youth. There's venison shank stewed with star anise, inspired by hunting trips with his grandfather, and succulent seabass cooked in banana leaves, as in neighbouring Kerala province.

Dhamaka and Semma are best enjoyed with a group. The same convivial spirit infuses the city's new Middle Eastern-

inspired restaurants. At Zou Zou's, which opened last November in the new Manhattan West residential, office and shopping complex behind Penn Station, the scene is fuelled by Medjool Date Daiquiris and Sumac Spritzes. The open kitchen, around a wood-fired hearth, is the domain of chef Madeline Sperling, formerly of The NoMad and Gramercy Tavern. Sperling, who grew up in North Carolina, spent the past year immersed in the flavours of the Levant (with detours to North Africa), mastering a style of cooking she'd never tackled professionally. The menu skews theatrical, from kasseri cheese flamed tableside in Arak to fat-fried beef manti to orange-glazed duck borek on its own wooden pedestal. This is a place for big parties, with interactive large-format entrées: enormous tagines filled with spice-rubbed fried chicken and Moroccan pancakes, butterflyed black seabass wrapped in singed grape leaves, whole legs of grilled lamb.

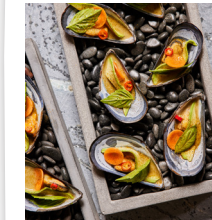
Offbeat dips and just-baked breads are also a focus at Ayesha Nurdjaja's Shukette in Chelsea, which opened to huge demand last year. Nurdjaja, raised in Brooklyn, of Italian and Indonesian heritage, began her deep dive into Middle Eastern cooking in 2017. The restaurant centres on a long counter facing a lively grill. "I wanted to blur the line between the front and back of the house," Nurdjaja says. She was inspired by Tel Aviv markets and restaurants like the Barbary in London, "where cooks are really talking to people".

Nurdjaja traffics in a proudly inauthentic mix of Middle Eastern flavours; and New York ingredients. "It's just my interpretation of wonderful food," she says. Her puffy garlic-studded Moroccan-style fenna bread pairs well with creamy salt cod dip (a brandade-taramasalata hybrid). Baby artichokes, expertly fried Roman-style, arrive on zingy house-made labneh. A show-stopping whole fish, slathered in green chermoula and harissa paste and served in the cage it's grilled in, is local porgy instead of ubiquitous imported branzino.

Michael Solomonov, the Israeli-American chef behind the acclaimed Zahav in Philadelphia, skewers more traditional at his new Brooklyn outpost, Laser Wolf (named after the butcher in *Fiddler On the Roof*) atop Williamsburg's Hoxton Hotel. Its alfresco dining room features East River views and a simple festive formula: his take on an Israeli *shippudya*, the boisterous kebab houses found across Tel Aviv. Bright salads and spreads arrive gratis on tables handpainted with backgammon boards, for nibbling with cocktails, while meat, fish, and vegetables for the table are charred near the coals on a long outdoor grill. Along with classic skewered meats – chicken shishlik tenderised in guava juice, Bulgarian beef kebabs fiery with Aleppo pepper – Solomonov grills whole trout, shawarma-spiced cauliflower and fresh foie gras (with grilled pitta for soaking up the melted fat and grilled pickled persimmons).

Chef Ed Szymanski, a transplant from south-west London – veteran of Pitt Cue in London and the Spotted Pig in New York – had been planning to open his own

Four tasting menus



ONE WHITE STREET
Tribeca (its mussels pictured above)

FREVO
West Village, hidden behind an art gallery

L'ABELLE
New spot from Robuchon alum

SAGA
A big-ticket sky-high dining destination in the Financial District



"refined English nose-to-tail restaurant" when the city shut down two years ago. He began brainstorming takeout ideas instead, pivoting to the "most to-go friendly English food there is – fish and chips", he says.

Szymanski tweaked a Heston Blumenthal recipe, which includes vodka and rice starch in the batter, so it "would stay crispier longer". In the summer of 2020, his golden hake and thrice-cooked chips went viral. Soon there were long lines outside the West Village catering kitchen he borrowed from a friend. "People would come from farther and farther away to eat," he says.

That menu lives on at Szymanski's cosy seafood restaurant, Dame, which opened next door to his pandemic pop-up last summer and has been booked solid ever since. In addition to the fish and chips, other aquatic wonders emerge from the two-person kitchen, from grilled oysters under chartreuse-infused hollandaise to steamed clams in eseplette butter to a blistered haunch of grilled cabbage with plump smoky mussels. A disco soundtrack, and an eccentric wine list split into "James Bond" and "Austin Powers" halves – the one old-world traditional, the other natural wines – keep things playful.

Szymanski's original, derailed concept, his English wood-fired grill, will open a few blocks from Dame in a larger space later this year, with a broad menu of meat, seafood and vegetables. The restaurant, insists the chef, won't ever serve fish and chips. ■HTSI



Top: fire-roasted leg of lamb at Zou Zou's. Above: nathai pirattal, with snails from New York's Peconic Bay, served at Semma. Bottom: a spread at Shukette including pitta, feta, labne and tuna meatballs.

The new Italians



FASANO
First overseas outpost of the Brazilian-Milanese power restaurant (its *tktktk* pictured above)

LODI
At Rockefeller Center

CISIAMO
Hot new Italian from Danny Meyer

