NEW YORK

MIXING IT UP

ALAIN DUCASSE TOOK PLENTY OF HEAT WHEN HE OPENED HIS FIRST NEW YORK SPOT. SO YOU'D THINK THAT THIS TIME AROUND HE WOULD GET THINGS RIGHT BY JAY CHESHES

SAMSUNG HOVERS ABOVE Times Square. A private British club is the hottest scene in the Meatpacking District. Spanish and Scandinavian department stores are drawing crowds downtown, and Danish hot dogs are the new fast food. George W's unilateralism be damned, all the world is descending on New York. And nowhere is this new internationalism more apparent than in those extensions of far-flung culinary empires that are the city's swank new dining rooms.

The first outbreak of epicurean collisions between countries occurred a few years back, when Alain Ducasse opened his namesake restaurant in the Essex House. By the September launch of Mix in New York, his second project here, it had become an epidemic. Now, top toques from Tokyo, London, Mendoza, and even Saigon are getting set to conquer the city.

From Mauritius to Hong Kong, Monsieur Ducasse, arguably the world's most accomplished haute-cuisine imperialist, has built a collection of fashionable eateries, clones of his Paris restaurant Spoon, where he first toyed with chocolate pizza and upscale riffs on macaroni and cheese and the BLT. The food at these places pushes playfully at national borders, combining on the same menu a French interpretation of American spareribs with a jolt of curry or an infusion of sweet and sour. With a mix 'n' match list of meats, sauces, and sides, editorial control is left entirely in the hands of the diner—leaving, as you can imagine, plenty of room for some real fusion disasters.

New York, as Ducasse wisely surmised, isn't yet ready for so much unguided freedom (imagine Tom Colicchio's Craft on an Epcot tour of the world). What he delivered to our shores wasn't Spoon but something at once more and less ambitious. Shelving the multiple-choice approach, the chef announced, in a self-conscious bit of mythmaking, his intention to bridge the massive maw that divides our country from his—to achieve on the plate what presidents and prime ministers have been unable to accomplish elsewhere.

Patrick Jouin's hypermodern design for Mix includes video monitors secreted in corners and walls hidden behind Plexiglas.

The premise this time is to present, side by side but without ever fusing them, the rib-sticking simplicity of both French and American peasant cuisines. And despite a certain degree of fussy deconstruction, the dishes offered at thrice the price of the bistro and diner originals are really not that far removed from their humble roots. The result is that this example of kitchen diplomacy feels about as comfortable as did that *bisou* planted on our First Lady's hand by Jacques Chirac a few months back. Ultimately, Mix is merely dumbed-down Ducasse: a Wolfgang Puck Express at Spago prices.

Take the *blanquette de veau*, which, sprawled in an undistinguished cream and pairing fat-beveled breast with a stringy tenderloin rolled up like a finger, has absolutely nothing on many a *grand-mère*'s stew. And now that real barbecue has come to this city, it's particularly difficult to forgive the Ducasse version—a solid, but wholly uninspired, personal pot layered with creamy corn pudding, slow-cooked greens, and boutique pork presented both stewed and shredded and in slabs. The restaurant's most egregious comfort-food crime, however, is a chicken potpie that would be an embarrassment even in the most basic neighborhood tavern, its gluey crust and goopy filling hiding scarce bits of chicken and fancifully carved carrot rosettes.

Although there's an occasional glimmer of the old haute-cuisine warhorse—in a harmonious salad layered with minced olives, crisp cucumber, and cubed tuna confit so tender it's almost gelatinous, and in a smoky New England clam chowder so rich in cream you half expect it to be billed as "Velouté Nouvelle Angleterre," most of the dishes fall short of the mark. Oddly enough, the most consistently satisfying items are the shareable sides reminiscent of the offerings at Spoon. The restaurant ought, perhaps, to have couches, a DJ, and a downtown address. Cold beer and a Ducasse BLT (a yard-long, tapenade-

MARC JOSEPH

slathered slice of country bread piled with pancetta sheets, thick bacon ribbons, and hunks of heirloom tomato and romaine) would make a perfectly glorious light supper with friends. And if the noodles didn't arrive with the rubbery consistency that comes from basking too long under heat lamps, the reimagined macaroni—long tubes filled and topped with no fewer than three cheeses—might be a wonderful way-off-diet indulgence. Even better is the Francophone version, a deluxe, buttery jumble of country ham, tiny elbow pasta, and black truffle *jus* that's the kind of snack an aristocrat's offspring might devour while reading *Tintin* in bed.

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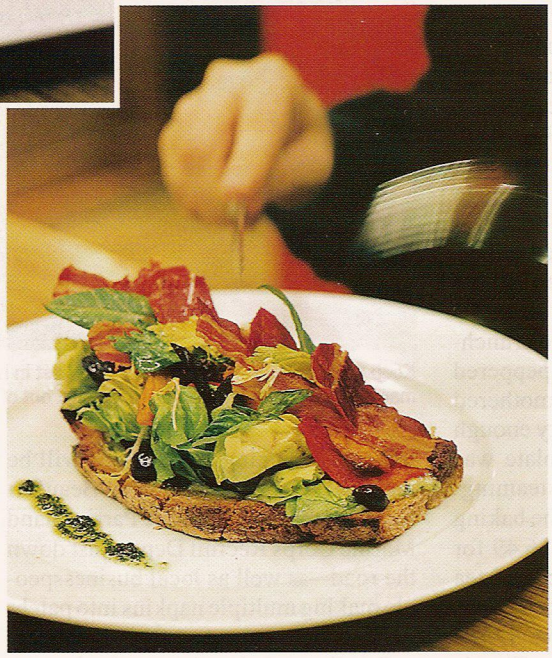
It's hard to argue with Ducasse's succulent slow-cooked bison or his take on the classic BLT, piled high with pancetta and chunks of heirloom tomatoes and romaine.



MIX MAY BE MISGUIDED, but there are some fireworks in the window dressing—the hypermodern design by Philippe Starck protégé Patrick Jouin, for example, includes a chain-mail curtain and walls hidden behind Plexiglas. Tiny video monitors secreted in dark corners offer what purports to be a glimpse of the chaos in the kitchen (they are, in fact, prerecorded), and onto the chef's table shines a meal projected through a revolving spotlight. But the high-concept experience doesn't jibe with the food. Instead, the whole experience feels forced and inauthentic, far too aware of its own cleverness.

It starts with the peanut butter and jelly, which reaches the table the moment you sit down. Presented as it is with standing slices of bread, it's meant to grab you like a carnival barker, announcing, "Hey, isn't this fun!" As it turns out, the peanut butter is extraordinary, and if the meal continued in this vein—if in fact the restaurant didn't take itself so deadly seriously—it might have been the start of something great.

But then come the cold appetizers, displayed in stackable petri dishes and paraded from table to table like high-gloss dim sum on a custom-made plastic pedestal. The transparent containers, full of layers of crisp vegetables and savory custards, are great eye candy. But, sliding around on their glass saucers as they do, they are utterly impractical when it comes to actually eating.

Finally, there's the service, which is attentive to a fault. A half dozen waiters swarm around the tables, exceptionally eager to explain the vision behind Mix, the confusing menu, and the odd price plans (a $48 meal option includes an appetizer, a soup, and one side dish), or to ask what the problem might be with that overcooked piece of cod.

Despite having partnered with buzz maestro Jeffrey Chodorow (most recently the financial muscle behind Rocco DiSpirito's much-hyped Italian spot), Ducasse has made many of the same mistakes that plagued his original foray across the Atlantic. The first time around he imported, intact, an authentic French temple of gastronomy—an exact duplication in price, service, and pretentiousness of his three-star flagships in Paris and Monaco. But he quickly became acquainted with the particular prejudices of New York diners—especially on the subject of three-hour meals costing $400 a head. So after the bad press came changes: Prices seemed to dip ever so slightly, absurd flourishes (that selection of fountain pens with the bill) vanished, and the very proper service became marginally less stilted.

Even the purportedly lowbrow Mix, however, features prices that in some cities could have you locked up for larceny. And, despite the flashy vibe, the formality here turns dinner into something of an ordeal. Uncomfortable seats and the requirement that everyone tackle three courses combine to heighten the pressure—keeping the hip and beautiful at bay while attracting the nipped and tucked. The restaurant has gone to great lengths to capture the kind of bold-faced energy that comes so easily to restaurateurs like Drew Nieporent, but for now it seems the prices and negative buzz are the only velvet ropes it will need.

Who can explain so many missteps, particularly from a chef like Alain Ducasse, whose brilliance is beyond dispute? Surely you can't put all the blame on the shoulders of Doug Psaltis, the 29-year-old from Queens appointed to run his mentor's kitchen. Could it be that the kitchen king—with three high-end restaurants, five Spoons, one Mix, his own cooking school, and countless other side projects—has, in the end, finally spread himself too thin?

MIX IN NEW YORK
68 West 58th Street
212-583-0300
Lunch Monday through Friday; dinner daily. Dinner: Prix-fixe options starting at $48.