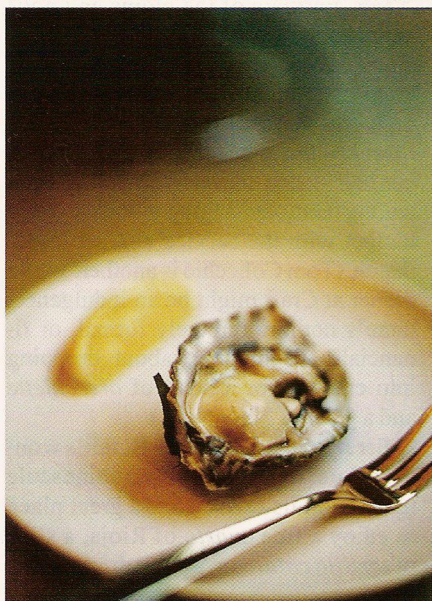


REVIEWS & CRITICISM

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NEW YORK



SMALL WONDERS

A HANDFUL OF CHEFS AROUND TOWN ARE PROVING THAT IT DOESN'T TAKE SOARING CEILINGS OR MULTIPAGE MENUS TO MAKE AN OVERSIZE SPLASH BY JAY CHESHES

WAITED ALL WINTER LONG for the blockbuster restaurant season that had been announced for early fall, for the triumphant return of kitchen-less chefs, for ambitious partnerships and the expanding empires of, it sometimes seemed, every marquee toque in town. I waited out construction delays and deals that fell apart, taking refuge in tiny new restaurants that opened softly, without any publicist's fanfare at all. And there, in rooms devoid of Frette linen and high-backed chairs, I found perfectly exe-

cuted nourishment and hands-on care.

Minute restaurant gems, it's worth remembering, are the real epicurean backbone of New York neighborhoods, places you stumble upon through a few word-of-mouth raves, adopt as your own, and share sparingly with friends. It's to these places—homes to a dozen tables perhaps, and a harried gent flying solo in the open kitchen—that I still find myself retreating. A handful of simple things done just right—the best \$9 pasta around, the most sub-

lime *frisée aux lardons*, a few flawless oysters: These are truly the most comforting salves.

Like its stablemate, the much-lauded East Village sushi shrine Jewel Bako, **Jack's Luxury Oyster Bar** is a precious jewel box. This time around, owners Jack and Grace Lamb celebrate the freshest raw shellfish, served alongside a smattering

of very haute Creole creations. The restaurant is a charmer; intimate and old-fashionedly opulent, it has the elegant grace you might

Red is the color of this true East Village jewel. At Jack's Luxury Oyster Bar: The inspired seafood tower and a Tatamagouche oyster.

find in the home of a wonderfully formal, and slightly batty, aunt. The silver is mother-of-pearl-handled Laguiole, the glassware of the type found hidden in armoires. The kitchen, with room for two, is up a short flight of stairs within wafting distance of the dining room. And though Jack or his wife might pop over from Jewel Bako across the street, the full-time host is a gracious, buttoned-up Frenchman who serves as waiter, maître d', and expert sommelier.

The chef, Ducasse alum Allison Vines-Rushing, deftly deconstructs oysters Rockefeller, simmers pigs' cheeks and langoustine tails together in a seductive smoky broth, and sends out cold shellfish that rank among the finest hand-selected specimens in the city. The inspired three-tiered seafood platter, among New York's priciest small-restaurant treats, features miniature Kumamoto oysters and littleneck clams, a few spicy crawfish, briny Taylor Bay scallops, and firm head-on shrimp so perfectly plump they are to ordinary shrimp cocktail what cheese from the can is to real Reggiano. Towering above it all sits exceptional caviar from the Mississippi River, to be paired with toast, shallots, hard-boiled egg, and, if you take the Frenchman's suggestion, a few green-apple glasses of Grüner Veltliner from Austria.

Claude Chassagne, a former instructor at New York's French Culinary Institute, plied his fusion craft for other bosses all over town before settling in last year on the Lower East Side. At **Chubo**, he's master of his own cozy domain. This little beachhead, on a stretch of Clinton Street suddenly frantic with restaurants, has gotten considerable praise from the New York food press.

Nonetheless, while many of his neighbors are packing them in, Chubo's few lonely tables often sit empty. This may have something to do with the menu posted outside: On paper the offerings sound simply disastrous. On the plate, however, the disparate ingredients achieve an odd harmony, like the jarring yet complementary purples and greens in a Van Gogh portrait. His mix-and-match, pfixe options may be the best deals in town, but it's in the new tasting menu (a mere \$13 more) that the real bargain lies.

One night, Chassagne kicked things off with crisp Chinese egg noodles topped with a pair of nicely charred head-on shrimp rubbed with Mexican spices. As the meal progressed, the food grew more frenzied in its globe-trotting—foie gras paired with corn bread stuffing and a Japanese-inflected vinaigrette; meaty miso-glazed monkfish served with pasta "fazool" and a bright red drizzle of Korean chile sauce; and *gremolata* on the same plate as Korean-style short ribs and an Asian take on orzo. And, for dessert, green-tea crème brûlée or German mango pancake. There's an undeniable finesse to this chef's cross-cultural creations, dishes that are shocking mostly for the venue in which they are served: a slight, overlooked room featuring very big food at very small prices.

ChikaLicious may be New York's most far-reaching little slice of culinary real estate, extolling the virtues of radically liberating sweet from savory. For the price of dinner at many East Village restaurants, you'll get a sugary three-movement symphony—an elaborate plate bookended by an *amuse* and a selection of perfect petits fours—that's handcrafted to order behind a sleek, sushi-bar-like counter. There is nothing

cuddly about this very grown-up sweet tooth's retreat. Chika Tillman's desserts are light and very fine, almost Japanese in their elegance, and are listed on the menu with their suggested alcoholic accompaniments—Sherry, Muscat, Tokaji.

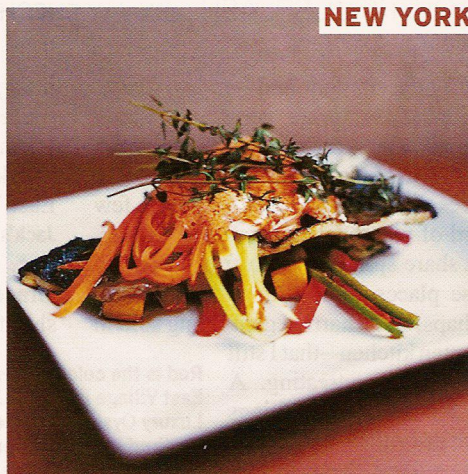
Beginning with a palate-cleansing sorbet, fashioned perhaps from blood oranges and rosemary, the constantly changing roster of confections might include pillowy steamed quince pudding, an ethereal rendering of *tarte Tatin* on a shredded-phylo base, earthy sweet-potato brûlée topped with eggnog ice cream, or a compact warm chocolate tart with red-wine sauce and an ice cream "quenelle" studded with pink peppercorns.

O F COURSE, SMALL RESTAURANT

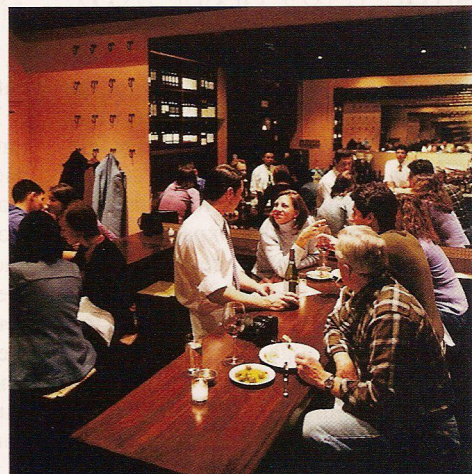
charmners are not merely the purview of the moms and pops and low-key mavericks. A few star chefs have also conquered the form of late, effortlessly downshifting from high-end flagship to homey sanctuary. Mario Batali is one master of the game, his half dozen places—three new ones among them—managing to satisfy every budget with the service and setting to match. (Tom Colicchio is another. While dinner at Craft might be an indulgence, there's nothing remotely formal, or financially frightening, about dropping into craftbar for a bowl of *orecchiette* and a glass of Pinot Noir.)

Bar Jamón, the annex to Batali's wonderful new **Casa Mono**, is a minuscule treasure in its own right—a great place to enjoy a fine *cuarto* of Rioja, a slice of *tortilla catalana*, a plate draped with

Celebrating sugar at Chika Tillman's ChikaLicious; Chubo's grilled trout with julienne vegetables and Japanese sweet-potato hash; mixing it up over small plates at Mario Batali's Bar Jamón.



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silky sheets of *jamón serrano*. Unfortunately, it was so overrun in the early days that whatever delights might have been in the glass or on the plate were quickly lost in the frantic hustle to claim a little elbow room of your own.

Nonetheless, Bar Jamón is a stroke of genius, not merely for the food and wine on hand, but for the foresight that went into its creation. Without this pressure valve, the main event next door would be an absolute nightmare. From day one, both places have been besieged by Batali groupies, unruly mobs adeptly handled by the staff. Under the sure hand of former Babbo chef Andy Nusser, the small plates of robust Spanish fare at Casa Mono are simply dazzling. Pristine, challenging ingredients, many listed on the menu *en español*—the most succulent sweetbreads in town, a refreshing cow's-head terrine, wild boar served medium-rare, tiny cockles showered with scallions and scrambled egg—nudge this restaurant, along with its diminutive sidekick, straight to the top of the Iberian heap.

BY NOW, most of the big scene-stealers have finally arrived. Flashier and pricier than anything in recent memory, they are undoubtedly something to see. But when the excess and the glitz become just too much, it's in Manhattan's tiny labors of love that I'll take refuge—for the easy dinner-party vibe, for the owner at the door, for the reassuring clamor from the kitchen nearby. And, of course, for the food—often more clear-headed and forward-thinking than anything you'll find at the biggest-ticket joints in town.

CASA MONO (Bar Jamón is next door)

52 Irving Place

212-253-2773

Open daily; small plates, \$3 to \$15.

CHIKALICIOUS

203 East 10th Street

212-995-9511

Open Tuesday through Sunday;
three-course desserts, \$12.

CHUBO

6 Clinton Street

212-674-6300

Dinner Tuesday through Sunday;
prix-fixe menus, \$25 to \$42.

JACK'S LUXURY OYSTER BAR

246 East 5th Street

212-673-0338

Dinner Monday through Saturday;
main courses from \$26. 🍷