

# REVIEWS

## AND CRITICISM



### NEW YORK WHEN AUSTERITY MET EXCESS

HOW ONE CHEF'S VISION LIVES ON IN RESTAURANTS ALL OVER TOWN BY JAY CHESHES

**A** FEW NIGHTS AGO AT BLT Steak, the four-month-old restaurant for the well-heeled on East 57th Street, two strains of Kobe beef topped the list of specials on the big blackboard. One version came from domestic cattle of Japanese lineage; the other, at more than twice the price, from the genuine, beer-guzzling thing. We ordered them both, then gasped when the gargantuan hunks of meat were set before us. (In Japan, where prized beef

is rationed like caviar, no chef would dream of exercising such blatant excess.)

The supersize Kobe is just one indication of how this steak house reflects the optimism creeping back into the city. There's also the three-tiered shellfish platter, featuring everything but a coral reef, and the veal chop worthy of Fred Flintstone. Throw in the massive 3½-pound lobster, and you've got yourself one lofty my-IPO-just-maxed-out throwback of a meal.

BLT (short for Bistro Laurent Tour-

ondel) is at once a product of these increasingly indulgent times and of the more somber ones that barely preceded them. For much about the restaurant is a direct echo of Tom Colicchio's Craft, the austere shrine to gastronomic minimalism that rose to prominence as the toned-down antidote to chandeliered excess in the months following 9/11.

The physical parallels alone are so

*Chairs with a view—and food with a pedigree—at East Village hot spot Hearth*

glaring you could forgive Colicchio for expecting to collect royalties. The same masculine urbanity pervades the dining room; the same no-nonsense menu fills a single cream-colored page; and the same Greenmarket sides arrive in individual little pots. Both places sell meals deconstructed for family-style feasting and homey desserts (apple and rhubarb crisp at Craft; warm banana bread pudding at BLT) that hark back to simpler times. Comparing the two establishments, in fact, reminds you that Colicchio wasn't quite the pioneer many of us billed him to be: Craft itself was just a sneaky twist on the traditional steak-house idiom.

But Tourondel, the man behind the much-mourned Cello, adds a Franco-phone touch to the mix. And the result is pretty irresistible—starting with the enormous Gruyère-topped popovers that are delivered the moment you sit down. Warm, eggy, and absolutely compulsive, they run the danger of doing you in before you've even begun.

You'll want to save some room, though, for the full-flavored aged hanger steak (far more convincing than that pricey Kobe); the meaty, perfectly cooked duck breast; the firm fillets of Dover sole luxuriating in caper butter (Tourondel's reputation for fish is well deserved); and the fresh vegetables, which are so richly appointed—sweet butterscotch carrots, spinach fairly mainlining heavy cream—as to preclude the need for dessert.

**T**OURONDEL'S uptown comer isn't the only place to have taken cues from Craft. In addition to improvising on his formula at Vegas's Craft-steak and at Craftbar and 'wichcraft (downscale offshoots within steps of the

original), Colicchio gave his blessing—and his backing—to one unofficial heir.

Hearth, which opened in the East Village back in November, is the brainchild of Marco Canora, the bearded perfectionist who ran the kitchens at Craft for two and a half years, and Paul Grieco, formerly the beverage director at Gramercy Tavern. And though the look of the place is different from that of its forebear, and the menu boldly reunites proteins with their vegetable and starch accessories, at Hearth, the apple hasn't fallen far from the tree.

Like its parent establishment, the restaurant is devoted to spare presentations of fresh seasonal fare. Some of its dishes, in fact, including all four sides, appear to have been lifted wholesale from Canora's alma mater. Both places serve the same buttery polenta; the same hen-of-the-woods mushrooms; the same silky potato purées; and the same mini-marshmallow-size gnocchi adorned with a sprinkle of Reggiano.

Canora appears to set off in his own direction with other plates, but a thumb through Colicchio's 2003 *Craft of Cooking* reveals recipes for rabbit *ballottine* (page 36), a gamy appetizer that turns up at Hearth with an overwhelmingly pungent quenelle of green olive tapenade, and braised veal breast (page 58), fleshed out by Canora with an impeccable pan-roasted sweetbread (page 38).

Who can blame the chef for knowing when he's onto something good? And Canora is so skillful that even his reproductions take on a flair that's all their own. The lucky guests seated at one of the high chairs lined up under the kitchen archway have the pleasure of

watching him sweat and meet, without ever crumbling, the demands of feeding a packed restaurant with the help of a handful of boyish cooks squeezed like Weebles into a shoebox. "Fire one gnocchi, one hen, one lamb," he orders, as a runner hovers near the heat lamps. Each dish lands before the chef for a flash inspection and the last tiny touches—a flick of parsley, a dash of zest, a sprinkle of salt. "Thanks for these ice-cold lemons," he yells out to no one and everyone, the sarcasm as thick as the foie gras *torchon* before him. "Thanks a ton, I really need these ice-cold lemons."

You get the impression that without Canora on hand the whole kitchen would descend into pandemonium, but under his careful vigilance, little seems to fall through the cracks. His clear-thinking red snapper *crudo* is sufficiently bright and refreshing to deserve an ocean view. His octopus, braised in red wine until it's as supple as lobster, is paired with a spunky potato and celery-root salad; and his tuna is an inspired take on the pedestrian appetizers you find on menus all across town.

But at Hearth it's not only about the food. Drag the ever-dapper Grieco away from those uptown ladies in pearls and request a tour of his admirably focused wine list. Short, well priced, and without any clutter at all, Hearth's is perhaps the city's most expertly edited compendium.

BLT and Hearth may be the most obvious knockoffs, but you can see glimmers of Craft all over New York these days: in the sudden ubiquity of à la carte sides, and in the new clarity that reigns on so many unblemished plates. Chefs will continue to tinker with his recipe, but Tom Colicchio's idea of redefining luxury by the simple perfection of reconnecting food to its source—of tasting the icy waters off Nantucket in a sweet candy-drop scallop, or inhaling the moist morning grass in a meaty shank of braised lamb—is undoubtedly here to stay.

Where freshness is a fetish: Hearth's tuna with capers, white anchovy, and lemon; BLT's aged hanger steak and Greenmarket sides.



**BLT STEAK**  
106 East 57th Street  
212-752-7470

Dinner Monday through Saturday; main courses, \$24 to \$79.

**HEARTH**  
403 East 12th Street  
646-602-1300

Dinner Tuesday through Saturday; main courses, \$18 to \$28. ☞