

Dining In

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RESTAURANTS

Frank Bruni

A Witty Kitchen That Rarely Winks

A WINTER that hadn't slapped us around too much was suddenly in a hostile mood, gusting with snow as I trudged — skidded, really — five blocks from the subway to Dovetail, where hunched employees shoveled and shoveled some more in a doomed effort to keep the entrance clear.

I expected an empty restaurant. That's what happens when the going gets wet: diners trash their reservations, take out their delivery menus and hunker down for the duration with General Tso's chicken. It's the only practical response.

But Dovetail isn't about practicality, not with its rotating sherry list, its lamb's tongue and its beef-cheek lasagne bedecked with king trumpet mushrooms.

No, this restaurant is a bold wager that a patch of the Upper West Side with an unreliable appetite for adventurous — even somewhat fussy — dining will embrace it, at least if it's executed with skill and panache.

And the bet seems to be paying off, because on that blustery night I encountered a dining room with just about all of the 80 seats filled by 8:30.

What a warm surprise. And what a testament to the intriguing, compelling work that John Fraser, Dovetail's chef and principal owner, is doing here.

Both he and his pastry chef, Vera Tong, come at their cooking with intellect and wit, but they seldom get too cerebral, too cute. Leaving quotation marks out of the titles of dishes, they leave it to you to make certain connections.

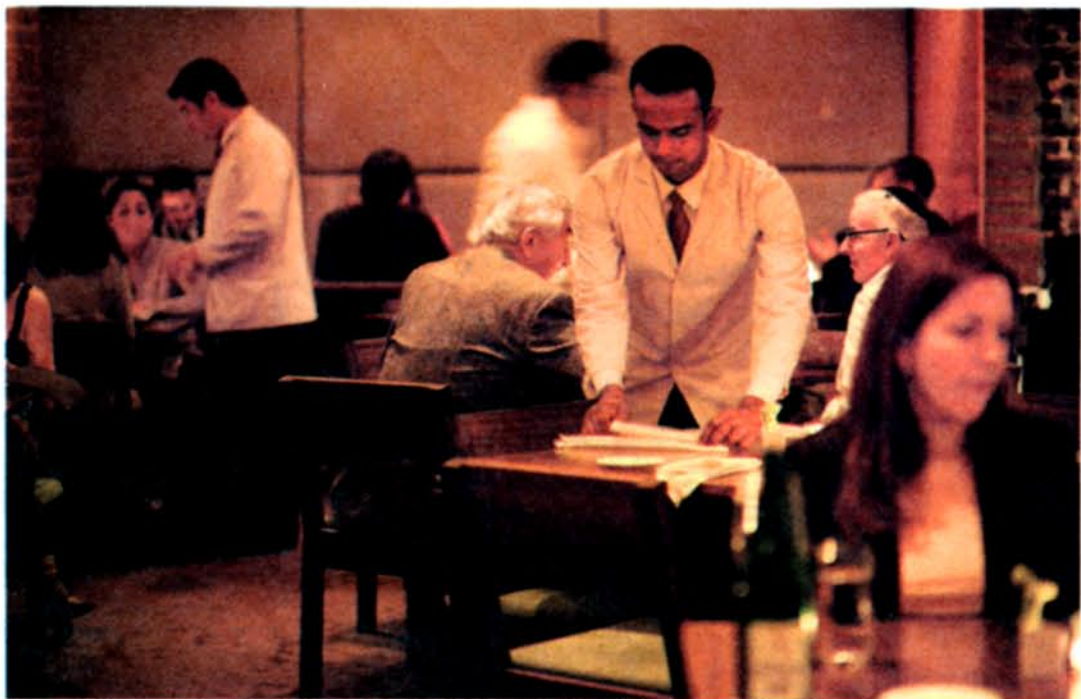
There's an appetizer that combines two of the most fashionable ingredients in upscale restaurants these days, seared pork belly and a slowly poached egg, and as soon as you taste them together, you smile at what's afoot. It's breakfast for dinner, only at breakfast the belly is smoked and called bacon.

In one of the entrees, curls and chunks of lobster are scattered around monkfish, reminding you that this fish has often been cast as the poor man's lobster, vaguely similar in texture but not nearly as sweet.

So you find yourself not only enjoying but also comparing the two kinds of seafood. Then you notice some seared foie gras, which may or may not be another inspired bit of culinary free-association, inasmuch as monkfish liver has been presented as the foie gras of the sea.

Is that the idea? Does it matter? Not really, because the dish works, its less and more opulent players establishing something along the lines of a rhythm.

And the real point is that such crafty plotting of a composition seems entirely plausible, given the amount of energy Mr. Fraser lavishes on his dishes.



ROBERT PRESUTTI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

NO DISTRACTIONS The décor at Dovetail on the Upper West Side is plain, in contrast to its menu.

DOVETAIL

★★★

103 West 77th Street, Upper West Side; (212) 362-3800.

ATMOSPHERE A brown palette, bare wood tables and exposed brick create a simple, cozy stage for attention-getting food.

SOUND LEVEL Moderately loud.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Gnocchi with veal short ribs; lamb's tongue; pork belly; scallops; halibut; venison; lamb; cod; brioche bread pudding; peanut butter praline tart.

WINE LIST A diverse, comprehensive and somewhat expensive sampling from the New and Old Worlds, with too few truly appealing reds under \$60 a bottle.

PRICE RANGE Dinner appetizers, \$12 to \$17; entrees, \$27 to \$36; desserts, \$10. Five-course tasting menu, \$65.

Three-course Sunday prix fixe, \$38.

HOURS Dinner from 5:30 to 11 p.m. Monday through Saturday and to 10 p.m. Sunday. Weekend brunch and afternoon tea on some days to be added in March.

RESERVATIONS For prime dinner times, call at least two weeks ahead.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Inaccessible.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN Ratings range from zero to four stars and reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

PAST REVIEWS from The Times, with additional capsule reviews:

nytimes.com/dining

The lamb's tongue — breaded, fried and straight out of Mario Batali's *offal dreams* — is part of a deconstructed muffledetta sandwich that includes olives, pimentos, a caper mayonnaise and a visually arresting spiral of salami, provolone cheese and more. That's just an appetizer.

The beef-cheek lasagne is among the entrees, but it's essentially a side to unerringly salted slices of sirloin steak. Many chefs would be content to throw a potato gratin at the beef.

For her part, Ms. Tong fashions a nifty brioche bread pudding studded with a brittle made of bacon. It's breakfast for dessert, only at breakfast the bread pudding takes the form of French toast.

Mr. Fraser and Ms. Tong worked together at Compass, a restaurant that went through a changing cast of chefs, all saddled with its large scale and peculiar atmospheric.

Dovetail, which opened in December, is a better fit for them,

the simplicity of its brown palette, bare wood tables and exposed brick at once balancing out, and allowing you to focus on, the ambition of their food.

The inconspicuousness of the restaurant's entrance may be bonkers or in fact brilliant, a subtle signal of Dovetail's confidence in its inner strength. The carpeting and padded walls in the back definitely make sense. They keep noise in check.

Depending on where you sit, the restaurant can feel too plain for entrees that average above \$30. The wines by the glass could be more exciting, and a few dishes don't succeed, like an appetizer marriage of skate and chicken wings that's inspired by seman-

Diner's Journal

A blog by Frank Bruni and other Dining section writers on restaurants and food:

nytimes.com/dinersjournal

tics more than anything else.

All of that gives me concern about the possibility of a slightly disappointing dinner here. But most of my experiences were hugely positive.

Dovetail further strengthens its case with a nightly five-course tasting menu that's kindly priced at \$65. The Sunday prix fixe — three courses for \$38 — is quite simply one of the best deals in town. And when I had it the options weren't dreary second stringers.

They included the restaurant's gnocchi, flavor-bombed with veal short rib and foie gras butter, and a shrimp dish that resurrects hollandaise and makes you wonder why it fell out of vogue. At Dovetail it avoids its potentially gluey fate, and it's offset by the sweetness and tartness of grapefruit segments.

The shrimp are upgraded to scallops for the version of the dish on the à la carte menu on other nights. For the tasting menu on those nights, Mr. Fraser mixes things up anew, choosing ham, endive and kumquats as the scallops' supporting cast.

When I had that dish, the seafood was beautifully cooked, as was a yogurt-lapped lamb duo (leg and rack) and an autumnal treatment of tender venison with chestnut and yam.

Did Mr. Fraser need both of those sidekicks for the venison? Sometimes he seems too eager to please, overworking dishes.

But he'll also pull back and trust in the basic, homespun pleasures of something like the buttery white Cheddar corn bread at the start of every meal. It's the epitome of comfort, and a potent antidote to the coldest of winter nights.